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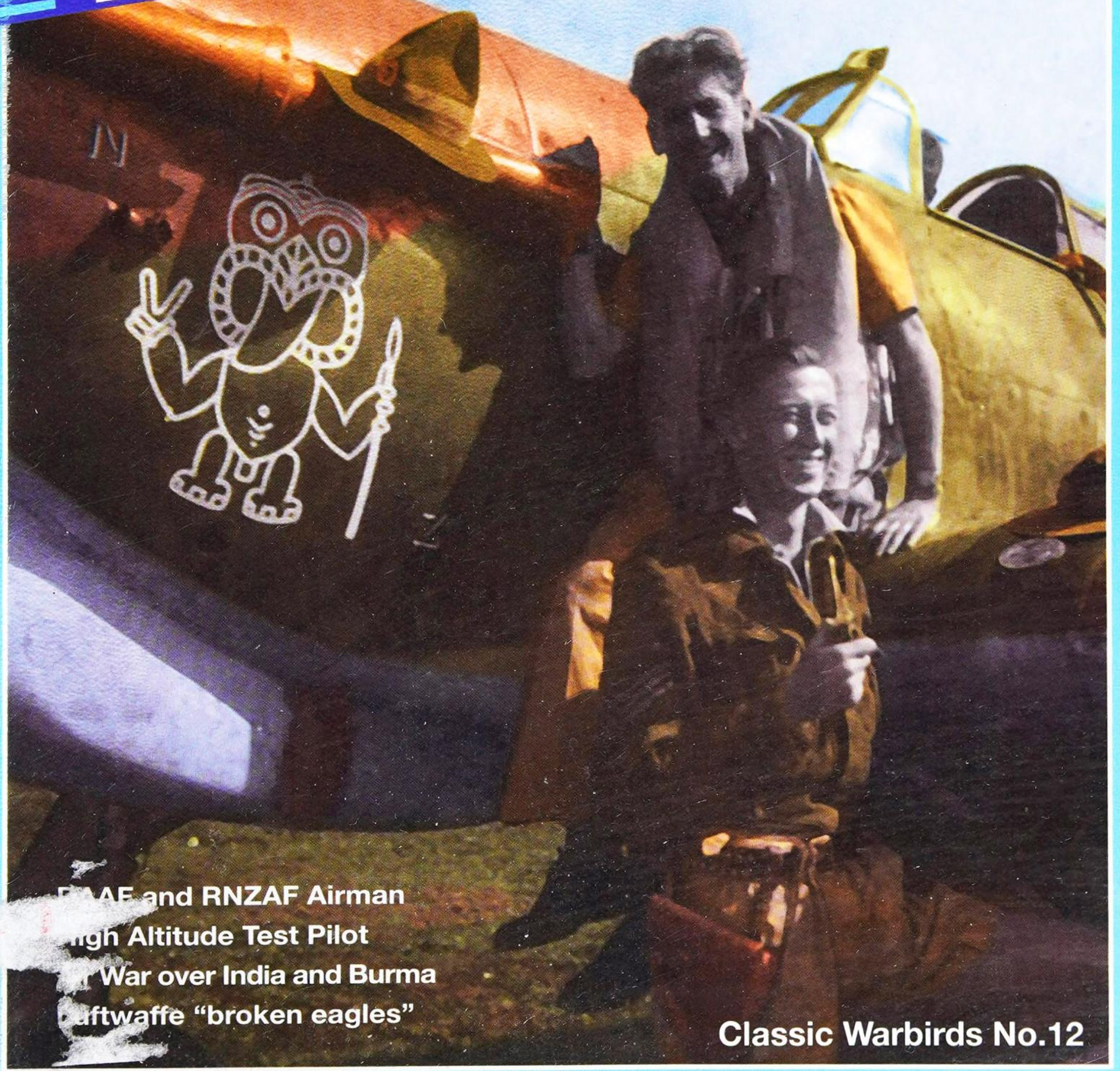
CLASSIC WARBIRDS

"The ANZACs"



- RAAF and RNZAF Airman
- High Altitude Test Pilot
- War over India and Burma
- Luftwaffe "broken eagles"

Classic Warbirds No.12

– Malcolm Laird and Steve Mackenzie –

CLASSIC WARBIRDS

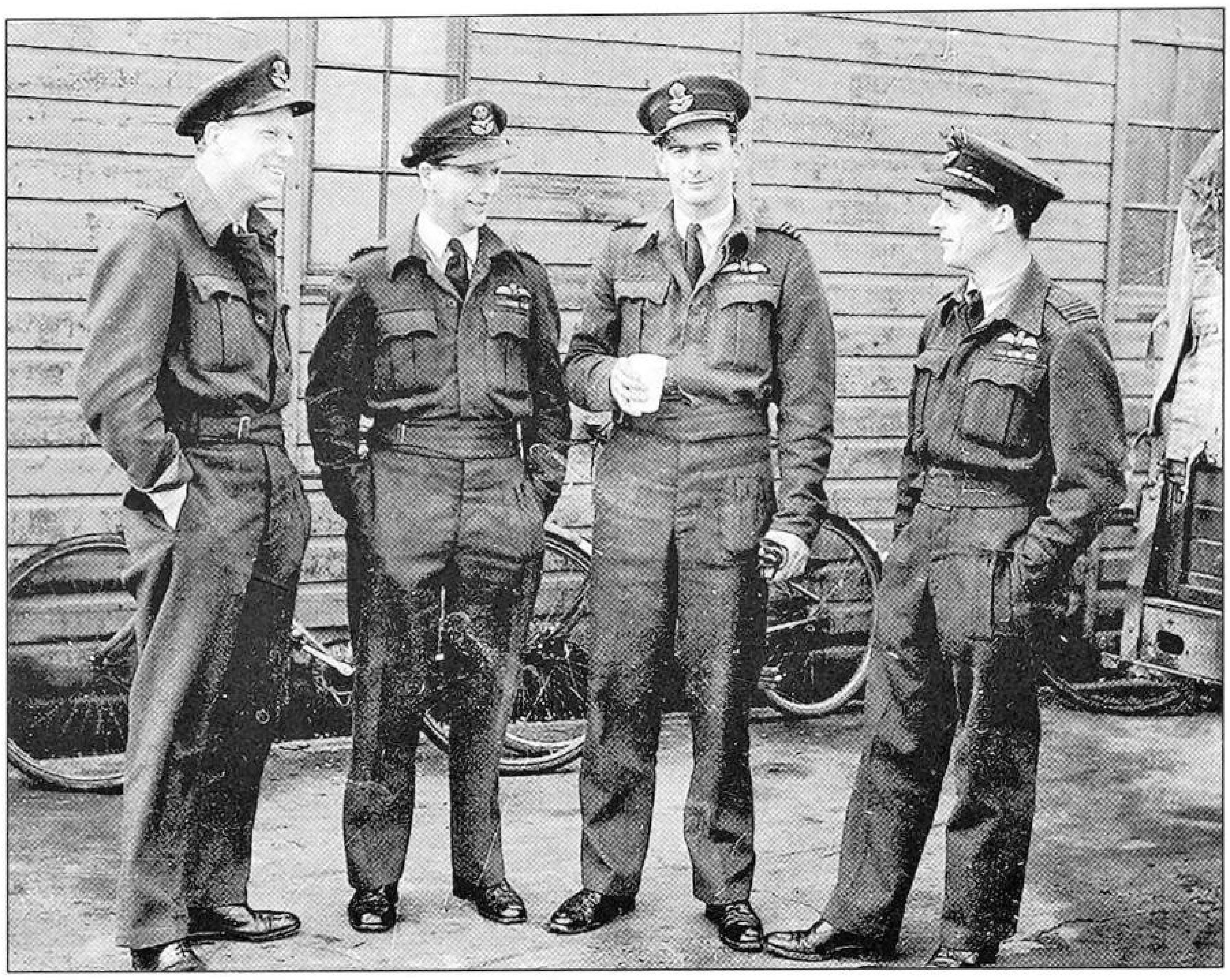
No. 12

– THE ANZACs –

BY MALCOLM LAIRD & STEVE MACKENZIE

No.81 Squadron pilot Flying Officer Larry Cronin (RAAF) with ground crew members in front of his Spitfire F.VIII in India. He survived the war and returned home to Australia. Cronin served with Alan Peart (see page 43) in Britain, North Africa and the Far East. (A Peart)

INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Wing Commanders Habjohn, Johnny Checketts, Edward 'Hawkeye' Wells and Colin Gray, at the Central Fighter Establishment, West Raynham, 1944. (B Gray)

This twelfth book in the Classic Warbirds series "The ANZACs" is a revised and expanded version of the earlier "Spitfire - The ANZACs".* Some stories have been deleted and new material added, such as the Luftwaffe "broken eagle" photos from the collections of airmen whose service careers are covered.

Some new Hurricane photos are accompanied by only brief text or added to existing stories as the airman who took them, Hugh Dean, was killed in action. Fortunately we were loaned his photo album and log book by his family.

We acknowledge the assistance and interviews granted to myself and Steve Mackenzie by the ex-service men who appear in this book, most of whom have now passed away.

We acknowledge the help given by Ian K Baker, Greg Callaghan, Ross and Carol Dean, David Frowen, Betty Gray, Marc-André Haldimann, Christian Kättlitz, Judy Laird, Lynette Norton and Neil Schrader.

* *The original ANZACs were the Australian & New Zealand Army Corps of WWI fame, although more recently the term has come to signify Australian and New Zealand things military, in a more general sense.*

Malcolm Laird

Ventura Publications

FRONT COVER (PHOTO IS COLOURISED)

Hugh Dean, top, and Charlie Beale with Beale's Hurricane Mk II, most likely in early 1943. Dean painted the Maori Tiki nose art on this aircraft.

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By Malcolm laird and Steve Mackenzie
Illustrations.. Malcolm Laird.
Cover design.. Judy Laird.

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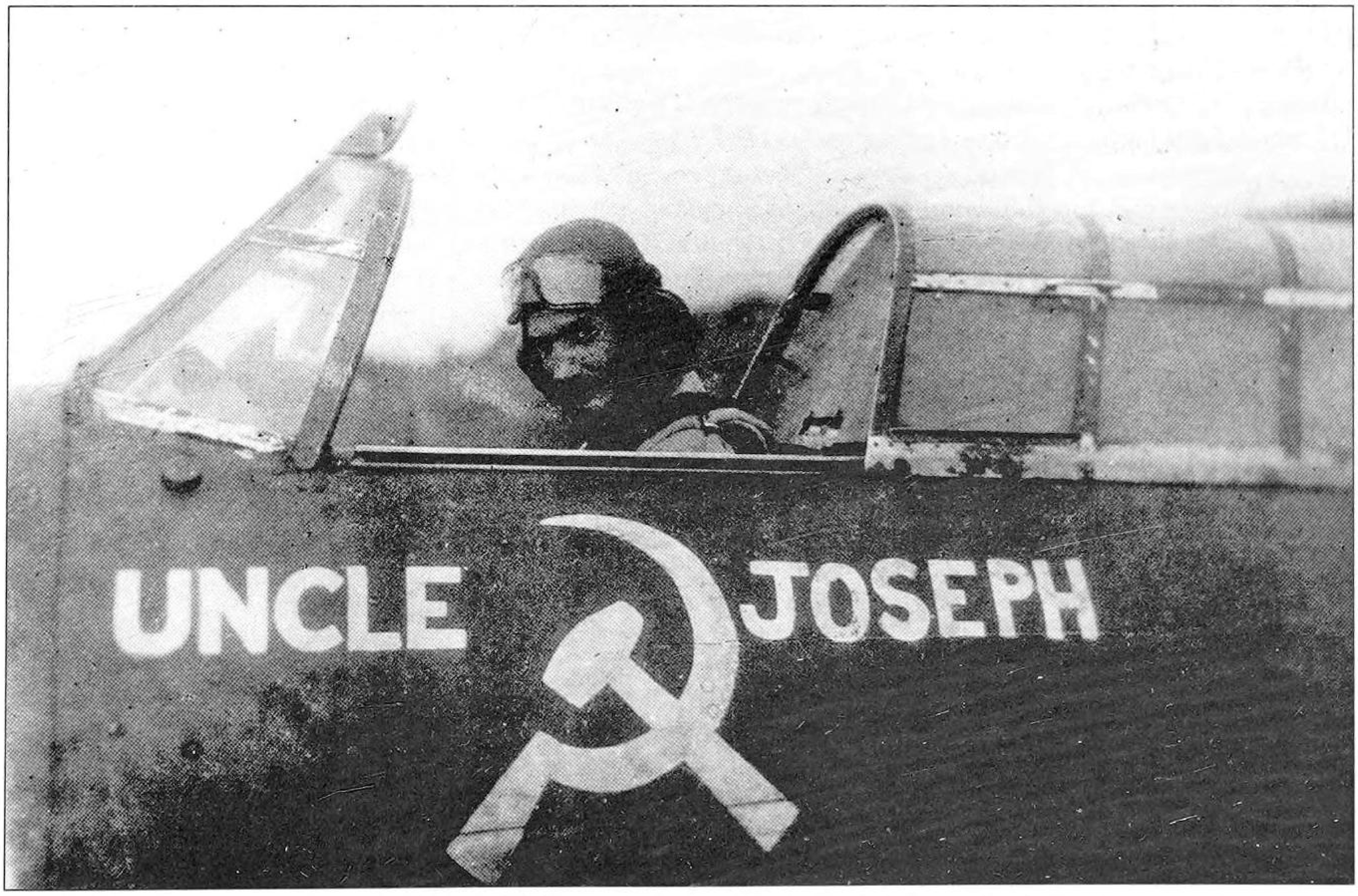


Pilot Officer WHF 'Hugh' Dean, RNZAF, in his Hurricane Mk IIc HL791 shortly before being killed in action. Dean served with 135 Squadron in the defence of Burma and India from February 1942 until his death on 31 March 1943. At that time No.135's pilots were flying multiple combat sorties each day and the exhaustion from continual combat is etched into his face. (Ross and Carol Dean)

WING COMMANDER R C BUCHANAN, DFC, USAM, RNZAF

When war broke out Roy Currie Buchanan was an engineering cadet with the City Engineer of Invercargill, New Zealand. He was attending night classes to prepare for the Institution of Civil Engineers exams and one by one his classmates left to go to war…

"I too had volunteered and was given a badge to show I was awaiting call up. In the interim all volunteers were provided with a set of study assignments to complete, fortunately I had already passed my University Entrance exam so only had to attend night school to learn morse code. Eventually, on 13 April, the call came to report to the Ground Training Establishment at Levin and following our initiation there I was posted to Taieri, Otago, New Zealand. This was getting closer to the real Air Force as the air was filled with DH82 Tiger Moths.

"My first flying instructor was an ex Union Airways pilot, Flying Officer Rutherford, who was excellent and most friendly. Later I had a younger instructor, Pilot Officer Bayley. Considering the number of students they had passed through their hands I was thrilled to get letters from both, while later serving in England.

"On completion of the course we were sent on embarkation leave and then joined the ship *Dominion Monarch* at Auckland, leaving New Zealand on 22 July 1941. We eventually arrived in Halifax, Canada via the Panama Canal early on 16 August 1941. It was very foggy and we watched, awed by the sight as some 90 cargo ships loomed out of the mist and then disappeared seaward to make up convoys for Britain. Consequently our ship did not berth until about 11PM.

"Each of us received his posting, which in my case was to No.4 SFTS Saskatoon. We travelled there in trains which appeared huge to us after our New Zealand ones, air conditioned luxury, sleeper compartments at night and excellent meals. The dormitories at 4 SFTS we trainees lived in were in the shape of the letter 'H' with the ablution block in the centre. There was a mix of Americans and Canadians in our block and, as older folk will remember, we in New Zealand did not have insulated homes in those days. Consequently, there was a nightly war in the dormitories as we required no heat and the windows wide open, whereas the Americans and Canadians wanted the central furnace full hot and windows sealed. It was a nightly ritual, us turning it off, them trying to keep it on.

"After 6 hours 30 minutes dual on the twin engine Cessna Crane I went solo on that type and after some 70 hours flying training passed my 'Wings' test on 30 October 1941.

"After our passing out parade we were given seven days leave after which we were to report to Halifax where I was advised that I had been granted a commission. We received our draft orders and boarded the *Olaf Fostenes*, a Norwegian vessel of 3,000 tons and left on 22 November 1941. We enjoyed almost peacetime comfort, with two to a cabin and the

Flying Officer Roy Buchanan by the nose of a Spitfire PR Mk IV, Benson, England, 1942.

"Photographic Reconnaissance was the tool of the photographic interpreters to extract important military information from photographs, which had been obtained from high flying aircraft and immediately passed it on to the Navy, Army and Air Force.
When the pilot brought back photos they were subjected to a three tier interpretation. The first phase would have experienced interpreters check the film immediately for the information required. This could even be a quick look at the wet film before printing. Then there would be a very detailed check of everything on the prints and a report prepared. The third phase was strategic purposes, for example, detailed examination of airfields, railways, harbours etc." (R Buchanan)

very best of cuisine. All went well until about 2AM on the 25th when we were awakened by an almighty crash and alarm bells ringing. Thinking we had been torpedoed it did not take long to make the boat deck station! My cabin mate Ian Dunn and I had prepared for a quick 'abandon-ship' by having our trousers rolled down around our flying boots by the side of the bed, so we could quickly step into the boots and pull on our trousers in one easy movement. It turned out we had sailed straight into a convoy making for Canada and sustained considerable damage by hitting another ship. Repairs were effected in Newfoundland and we set sail again for England, arriving at Liverpool on Christmas Eve. My group travelled by train to London, checking out the New Zealand Club and then carried on to Bournemouth, where there seemed to be thousands awaiting posting, RAF, RAAF, USA, RCAF, SAAF, Rhodesians etc."

SPITFIRES

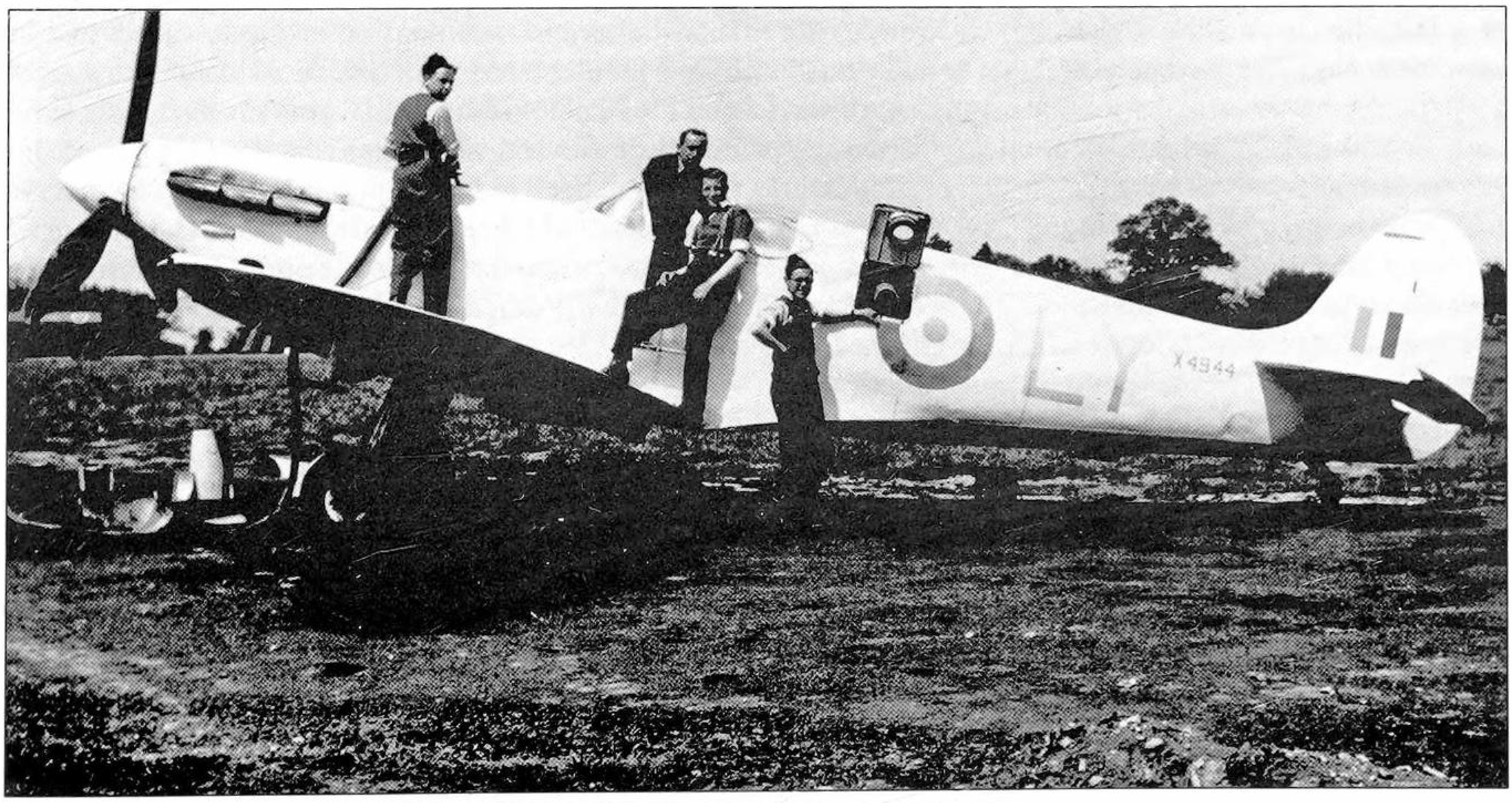
"On 23 January 1942 I was posted to Squires Gate, Blackpool for a General Reconnaissance Course, which was a prerequisite for Coastal Command. During this volunteers were requested for a more-or-less secret unit flying Spitfires – I put my name down. This necessitated a visit to Farnborough for a one hour test in the decompression chamber, set at 35,000 ft, which I passed.

"I started with the photo recce. unit on 31 March and completed conversion to the Spitfire on 17 April 1942. I was posted on to 'K' flight at Detling in Kent and there did low-level and high-altitude photo training missions all round the Midlands. A short diversion was to go to Watchfield and complete a beam approach course on Airspeed Oxfords before being posted to Benson in Oxfordshire, the operational station of No.1 Photographic Reconnaissance Unit (PRU). Although a prewar permanent RAF station with concrete buildings, Benson still only had a grass runway.

"There were no Squadron numbers in PRU at this time and the unit was divided into flights. I was assigned to 'E' flight at Benson, while some other flights were at St Eval in Cornwall and Leuchars and Wick, in Scotland. From Benson our aircraft ranged all over Germany and the occupied countries.

"I flew my first operation, to Cherbourg, on 6 May 1942, just 11 months out from my first solo in New Zealand.

"Our flight transferred to Wick on 10 July 1942 and from there we regularly photographed the seaports and airfields of Norway. A particularly important target was the port of Trondheim and to get that far north we would fly from Wick to Sumburgh in the Shetlands, refuel and continue on over nearly 600 miles of ocean before landfall. Allied convoys to Russia were vulnerable, in the North Sea, to attack from the German cruisers *Lutzow* and *Prinz Eugen* which were tucked up in torpedo nets at Trondheim – it was vital their location was closely monitored. Trondheim was heavily defended and anti aircraft fire was always encountered. The battleship *Tirpitz* was in a fiord further north, out of our range."



A white Spitfire PR type G (PR.VII), X4944, being serviced in England. A colour illustration of this aircraft appears in Classic Warbirds No.10. (R Buchanan)

LONGER RANGE SPITFIRES

"The PR Spitfires were derivatives of regular fighter models and differed in that all the armament and armour plate was removed, with the object to make them fast enough to range over Germany with relative safety. Range was important and as the normal Spitfire Mk V fighter held only 85 gallons in its main tanks, various arrangements were tried to increase this. Some 30 gallons were added behind the pilot, while the same amounts were added under each wing. However, the final arrangement was the 'bowser' model where the leading edge of each wing became a petrol tank holding 66 gallons. Although common now, this was the first wet wing arrangement for carrying fuel. There was also the option of adding a drop tank, either 30, 45, or 90 gallons. A 170 gallons ferry tank was available, although I never used one. To match the larger fuel load a larger oil tank was also fitted and this deepened the PRU Spitfire's nose profile.

"None of our Spitfire PR.IVs at this time had heaters, radio or IFF (Identify Friend or Foe transmitters), so good navigation and a fair amount of luck was required. Some however, were fitted with radio in about July 1942 and a homing could be requested.

"The more usual missions were at over 20,000 ft depending on the height at which condensation trails were produced. A measure of security was to fly just below trail height as anything above that would be seen – but the only real defence was a sharp lookout at all times.

"As no IFF was carried to help our early warning radar operators, we were cleared in and out over prominent coastal landmarks and, as we always returned at a fast clip descending and alone, we were easily identified. Northern European weather is notoriously bad and the upper jet stream winds would normally be over 100 miles per hour, so good navigation was important, especially as a fair proportion of a 3-4 hour trip could be in or over cloud."

On 9 July 1942 Roy Buchanan flew his longest ever sortie in a Spitfire PR.IV; five and a half hours carefully eking out his aircraft's fuel. He climbed out over the English Channel and continued south over occupied France to Toulon and Marseilles. His targets at Toulon were the ships of the Vichy French fleet which, fortunately for the Allies, were later scuttled at their berths. The south coast of France hove into view, 20,000 ft below. "What a thrill to see the Mediterranean, it was so blue!"

Completing his photo runs he turned for home managing his precious fuel and keeping watch for German interceptors below and just possibly their vapour trails above. He touched down at Tangmere, West Sussex with just 15 gallons in his tanks, not enough to reach Benson safely.

THE SPITFIRE PR.XI

"The second generation PR Spitfire was the Mk XI. This had the RR Merlin 63a of 1700 hp and this, with a four bladed propeller, boosted the cruise speed to 340 mph. Further sophistication was a heater both for the pilot and cameras. Fuel mixture and coolant temperatures were automated too. Mk XIs were the mainstay of the PR units from late 1942 until the end of hostilities, although in mid 1944 the Griffon engine Spitfire PR.XIX arrived in limited numbers. This developed 2050 hp and drove a five bladed propeller for a cruising speed of 380 mph at operational height. Our first PR.XIXs did not have pressure cabins, although later production models did. They had beam approach built into the communication system. We had come a long way since the days of no radio and with manual mixture and coolant radiator controls!

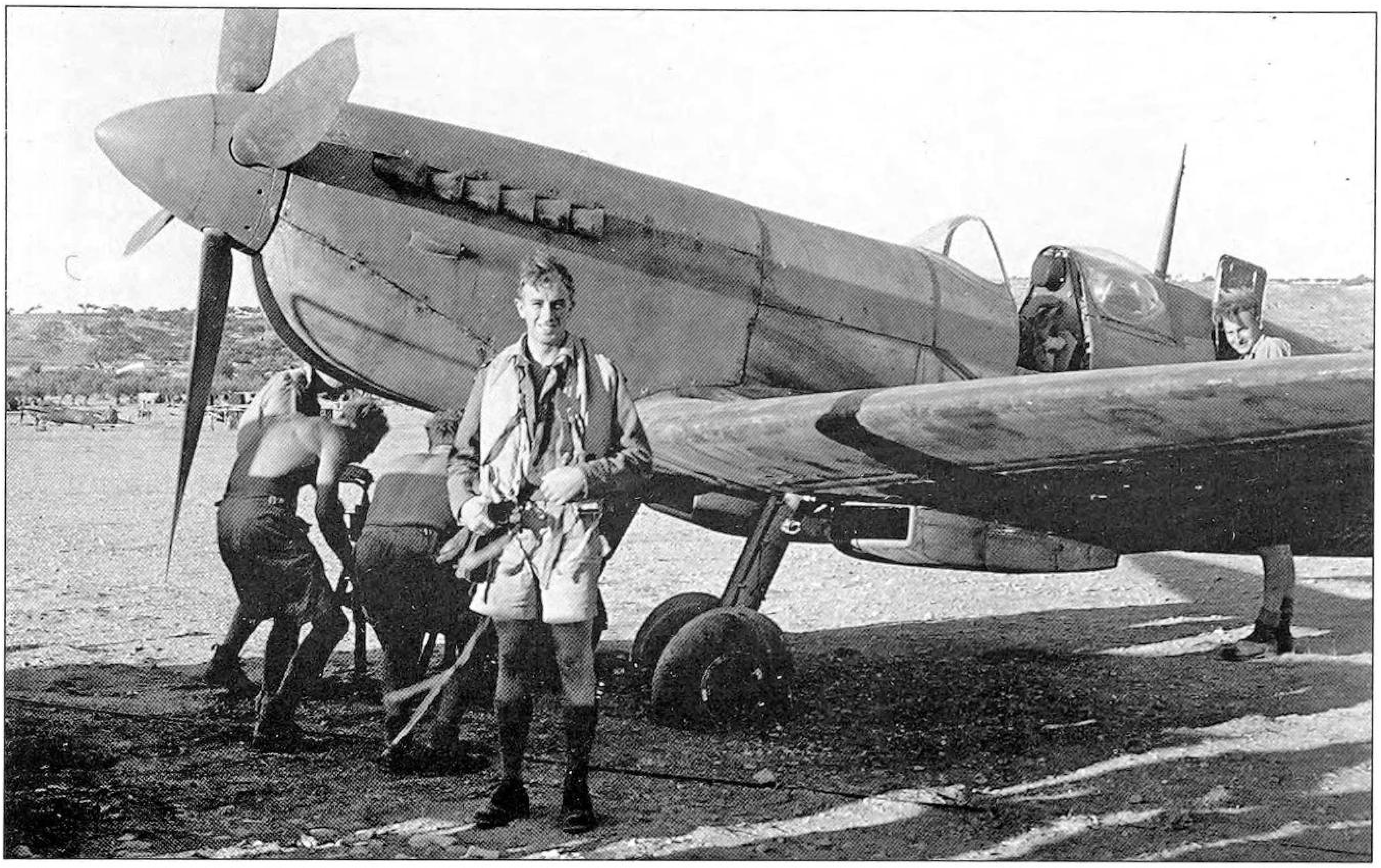
"The PR aircraft were painted a duck egg blue for normal high altitude work, but others were painted white, pink or standard fighter camouflage for low level oblique photography."

NORTH AFRICA

"While at Wick a call went out for volunteers to go into a new unit destined for 'overseas'. Being a New Zealander I was already overseas, so it made little difference to me and I put my name forward. The new unit was No.4 PRU and assembled at West Kirby near Liverpool. I was part of the sea group and we set sail for an unknown destination from Glasgow. Not until reaching the Straits of Gibraltar were we sure that our convoy was destined for Algiers, where we landed on 14 November 1942. Marching from the port to Maison Blanche airport was the first and only time I had to march in full battle kit – it was a considerable distance! Our PR.IV Spitfires arrived from Gibraltar, only to be totally destroyed in a German raid and I was one of the pilots sent back to the UK to ferry out new aircraft. It was a slow and cold night trip back in a DC-3, but a very enjoyable sunny return in the Spitfire from Portreath, Cornwall, to Algiers via Gibraltar."

AN EXPERIMENTAL SPITFIRE

"A PR.X pressurised Spitfire was sent out for trial by our unit and I managed to climb it to 40,000 ft but the fuel vaporised at that height and its engine would cut out, restarting at a lower level. It was not used operationally as it was disconcerting to say the least have one's engine stop in mid-air! Our area [to photograph] consisted of the south of France, Italy, Sardinia and Tunisia. While at Algiers we were joined by an American unit flying P-38 Lightnings, and the combined unit was known as the Mediterranean Allied Photographic Unit. Our commanding officer, by the way, was Colonel Elliot Roosevelt, son of the American President!



While serving with No.682 Squadron at La Marsa, Tunisia, Buchanan blew a tire taking off for a mission in this PR.XI and found a large 'gallery' had assembled to witness his return. Fortunately he managed to land without ground-looping, no doubt disappointing some onlookers!

"In Algiers No.4 PRU received Mosquitos which were to be used for longer range work. As I was the only pilot in the unit who had trained on twin engine aircraft, it was my job to convert some of our Spitfire and some of the American P-38 pilots on to the Mosquito. We had no dual aircraft, and my experience was a quick circuit with the ferry pilot, very scary! We had no navigators on strength so we flew two pilots on a sortie. The extra person was required to line up the pilot for the photo run and turn on the camera.

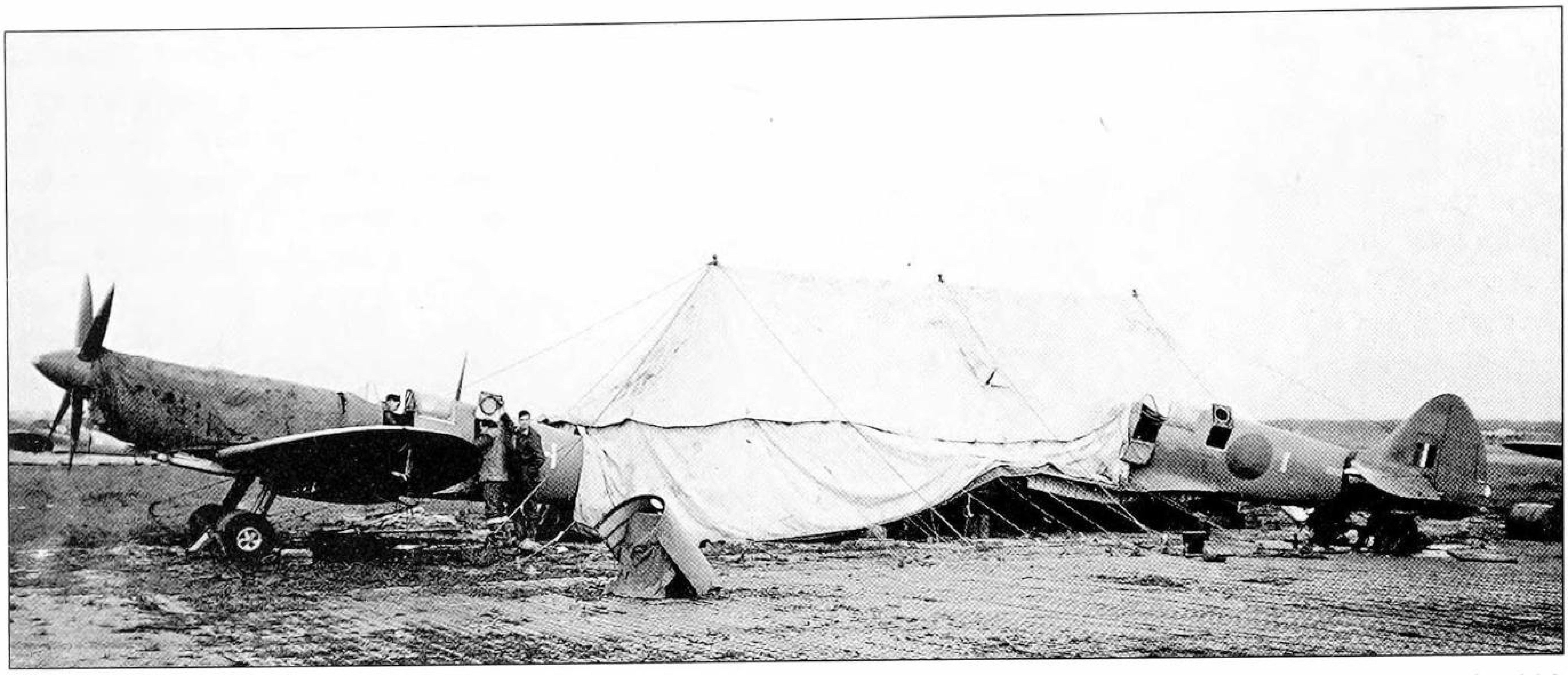
"As the 1st Army, which our units supported, and the 8th Army came together at Tunis; No.4 PRU, now renamed 682 Squadron, moved up to a grass strip captured from the Germans called La Marsa. Following injury in a car accident, (the CO rolled the station's Humber Snipe while taking some of us into Tunis), I was posted back to the UK on leave and was later sent to Dyce in Scotland. This was the operational training unit for PRU. Luckily, I managed to get back on operations despite there being many new pilots from the Empire Training Scheme by then."

V1s and D-Day

"I joined 542 squadron at Benson (part of the old No.1 PRU) on 5 May 1944 flying Spitfire PR.XIs. This was the period when the V1 flying bombs were causing havoc in Britain and their launch sites were being sought out, photographed and bombed. Also the preparations for the invasion of Europe were well under way, making our units busy. A new innovation had been perfected with cameras using a moving film. A typical sortie using this technique was to fly low level over the target using the normal 36 inch lens and match the speed over the ground to the speed of the film. You would fly at 300 mph over the target at 3000 ft so as to achieve photos with excellent close-up detail. It was a bit more of a thrill than the usual 20,000 ft height, although navigating was a bit trickier. I was given one of these sorties, a flying bomb site in Germany.

Flying a mission

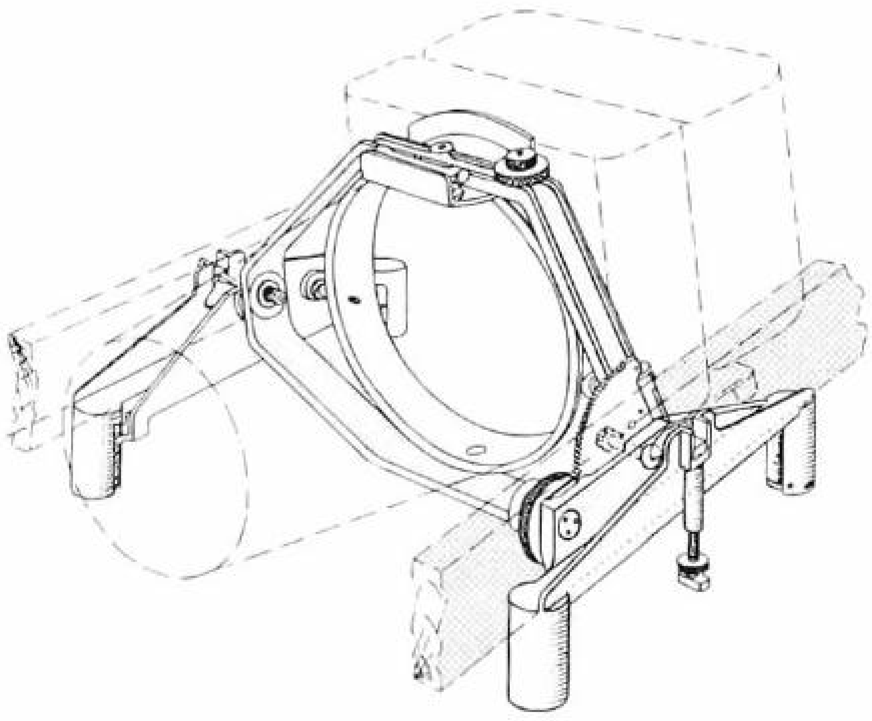
"The normal pre-flight briefing was for a pilot to be given the weather conditions expected over the targets and for him to note down the proposed courses on his Dalton computer, as all navigation was by dead reckoning. The Dalton computer was a 'roller blind' type device which strapped to one's knee. He would then collect a survival kit of silk maps and foreign currency; then move to the dispersal area where the aircraft would have been fuelled and the cameras loaded and tested." (R Buchanan)



Improvised servicing facilities for 682 Squadron in Italy. A Spitfire PR Mk XI is on the left and Mk XIX, RM639, on the right. (R Buchanan)

"Shortly after joining No.542 Squadron a request came from Italy for me to go out and take command of my old unit, 682 Squadron. This suited me fine and it was great to rejoin the ground crews I had come out to Algiers with and had got to know and trust so well. The pilots, of course had changed, but over the years the squadron had developed into a very efficient unit.

"A PRU unit consisted not only of the aircraft maintenance and overhaul crews but also a large photographic section which turned out hundreds of prints, often under the most primitive of conditions, using mobile laboratories. Then, of course, there were the photo interpreters, photo printing staff, intelligence, transport and communications sections etc."



An illustration depicting an oblique rear fuselage camera installation, as used for low level photography.

Encounter with a German Jet

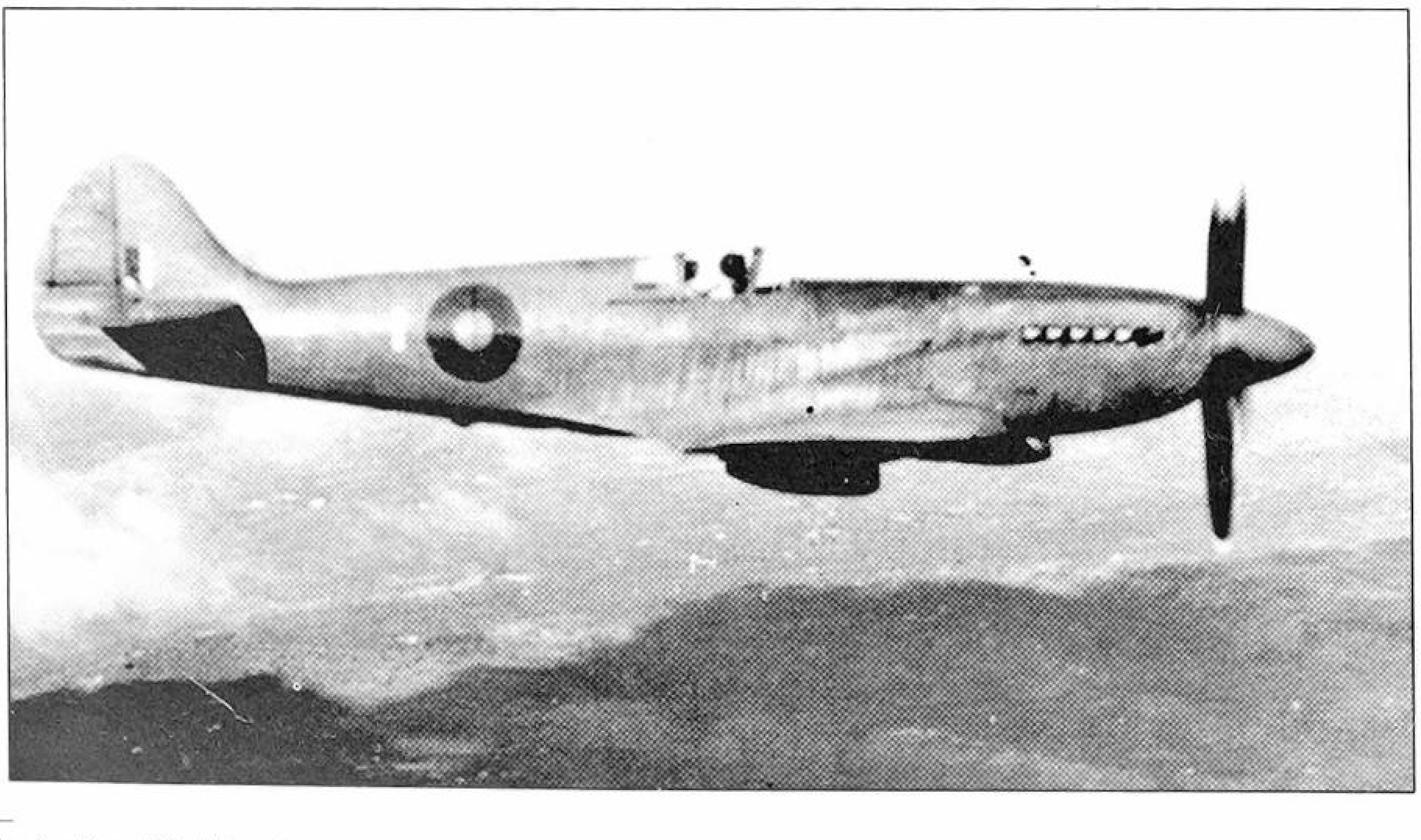
Roy Buchanan was flying a sortie over Southern Germany when *Luftwaffe* air-defence radar latched on to him and began guiding in an Me 262 jet to intercept his high flying Spitfire PR.XIX.

"A book on the Spitfire by Bruce Robertson[1] records my Squadron flying 236 sorties and 700 hours in one month and my encounter with an Me 262. Actually, when I read about some of the encounters fighter pilots had almost every day, this hardly bears a mention. It was usually the ringing in my earphones that alerted me to the fact that enemy radar was tracking me. Fortunately on this occasion, over Southern Germany, I was able to see the approaching aircraft in good time and, being unarmed, I made a quick descent and made my way back to Italy at ground level."

'Buchanan managed to avoid giving the German pilot a chance of a sighting shot and he eventually shook his pursuer off in an alpine pass!' – Bruce Robertson.

"Having used up a lot of extra fuel I landed at an abandoned airfield, in northern Italy. It was an eerie feeling being alone and not quite knowing if it was in our territory. As luck would have it I made my way to a road and was very pleased to see a convoy of Bedford 3 ton

Wing Commander Roy Buchanan flying Spitfire PR.XIX RM639 over Italy, 27 December 1944. (R Buchanan)



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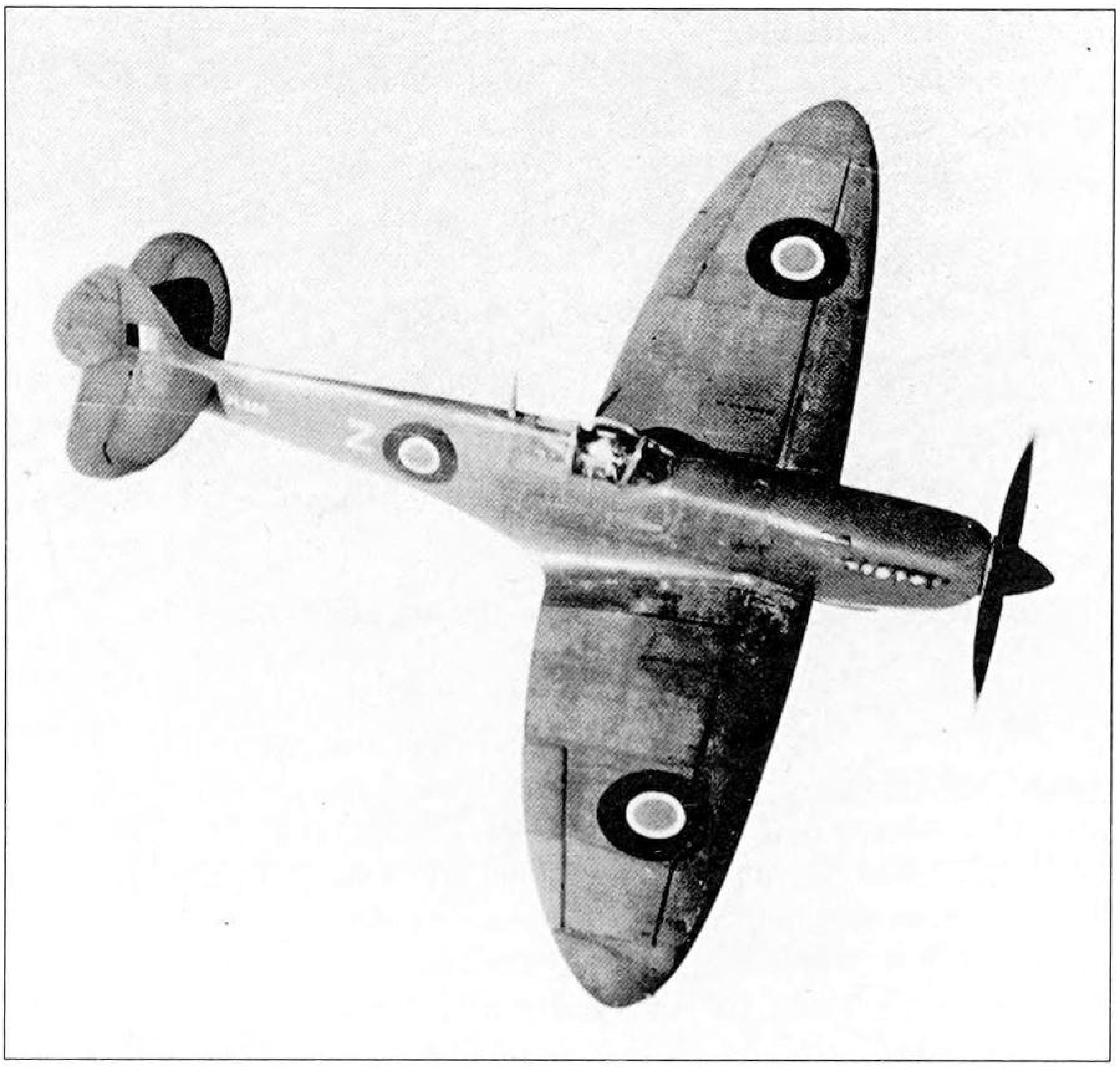
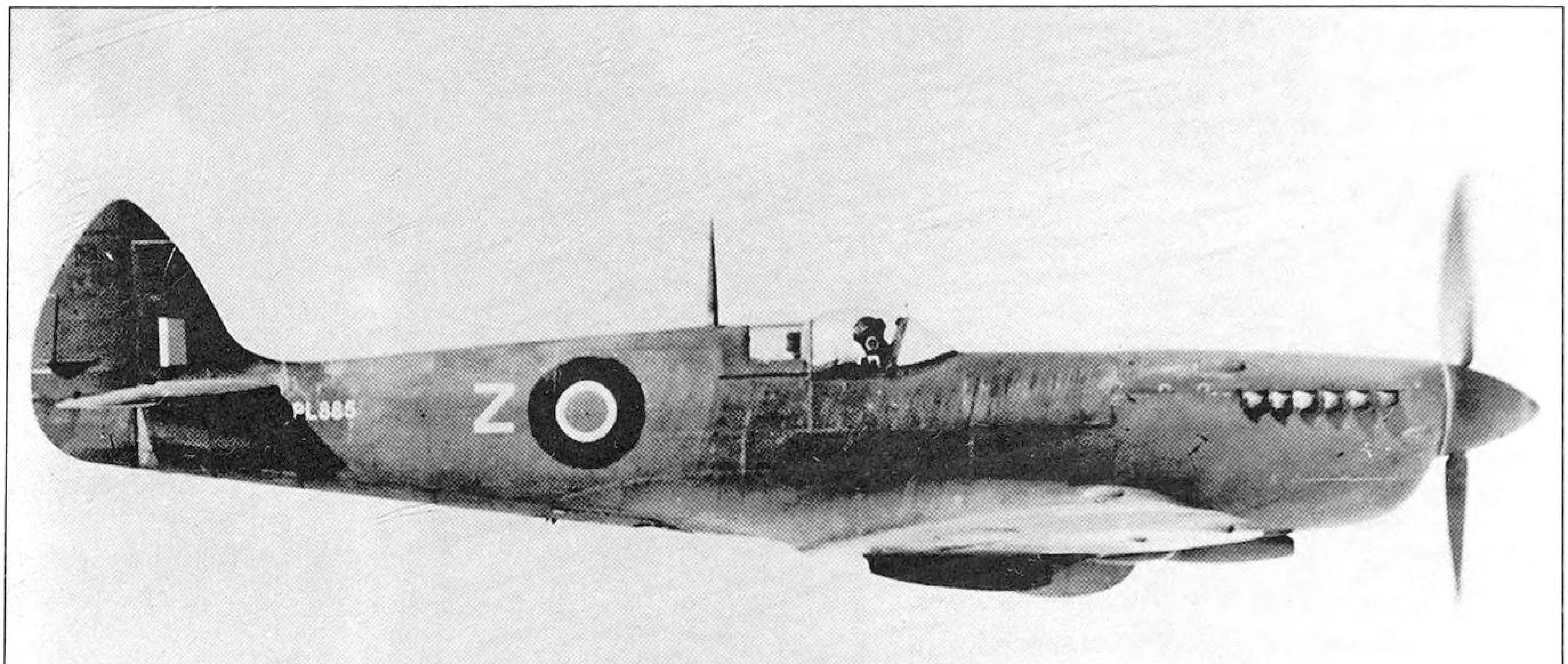
[1] Spitfire – The Story of a Famous Fighter, Harleyford Publications

trucks, which fortunately had drums of aviation fuel. I was glad I had not become another statistic as I had been posted overdue which usually meant you were dead or a prisoner in our business. When our pilots did not return it was rather disconcerting, to say the least – flying alone there was no witness to their fate.

"I had another close call, also from San Severo, after photographing in the Vienna area, where a constant bombing offensive against the oil refineries was being waged. The wind was not as forecast and it became obvious I was too short of fuel to cross the Adriatic to base. I radioed to see if we had any bases in Yugoslavia but there were none, although we occupied an island called Vis off the coast. This was my only hope, so I requested a bearing for Vis and switched to each tank in turn to make sure not a drop of fuel was wasted. I approached straight downwind and had just touched down when the engine stopped due to fuel starvation. I had to be pushed off the runway. It was a surprise to find another two of our aircraft there that had been affected by the same strong winds. The North European upper atmosphere winds were almost always from the west and over 100 mph, those in Italy were generally so light we could fly a course with very little allowance for wind. This day was the exception, almost with disastrous results."





This page. Two air-to-air photos of Spitfire PR.XI PL885, flying at altitude over Italy. Note the uneven appearance of the PRU Blue overall colour scheme. (R Buchanan)

WING COMMANDER

In March 1945, at just 23 years of age, Roy Buchanan took over 336 PR Wing at San Severo, Italy, which consisted of 682 and 683 Spitfire squadrons and 60 (SAAF) and 680 Mosquito squadrons.

"Besides the squadrons there was the usual headquarters staff full of 'boffins', engaged in intelligence. Although I was now in an administrative role I did manage to fly some sorties. We had established forward flights closer to the Army and supplies were ferried up from San Severo in a Beechcraft 18. I was the conversion pilot again, but it was a 'breeze' as the Beechcraft had dual control."

PEACE IN EUROPE

"The European war ended while I was Commanding Officer of 336 PR Wing and our repatriation home was worked out by a formula of age and service abroad. I relinquished command on 16 July 1945, sailed back to the UK from Naples and finally sailed for home on the *Andes* and in much more comfort as a Wing Commander than when leaving New Zealand as a LAC. Then we were accommodated in the converted theatre of the *Dominion Monarch* in bunks three tiers high. On the 26 January 1946 I was demobbed after four years, 289 days service, most of it overseas."

Post war Roy Buchanan graduated from Canterbury University College, in New Zealand, with a degree in Civil Engineering. He married Elisabeth Pairman in 1952 and they have three children and nine grandchildren. He flew part time with Amphibian Airways using the Grumman G44. The family moved to Gore in 1957 and he continued to fly for pleasure with local Aero clubs. He retired in 1981 as Christchurch Airport Director and he and his wife moved to Queenstown. He purchased an aerobatics aircraft and derived great pleasure from it until 1992 when it was sold, thus ending a 51 year flying career.

"I consider myself to be extremely fortunate in that I survived doing-my-bit during the war and enjoyed a satisfying career in Engineering, while still managing to indulge my interest in flying."

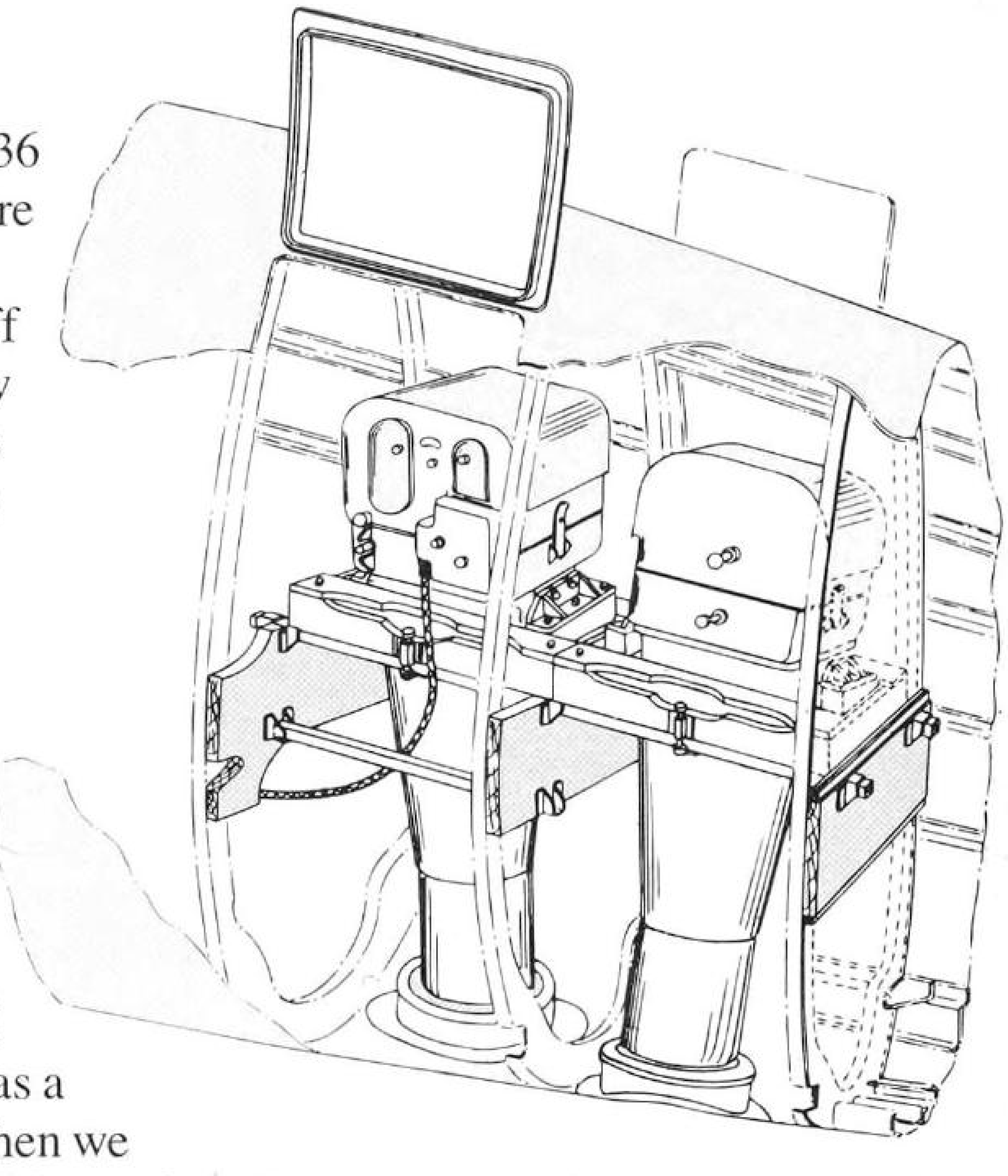
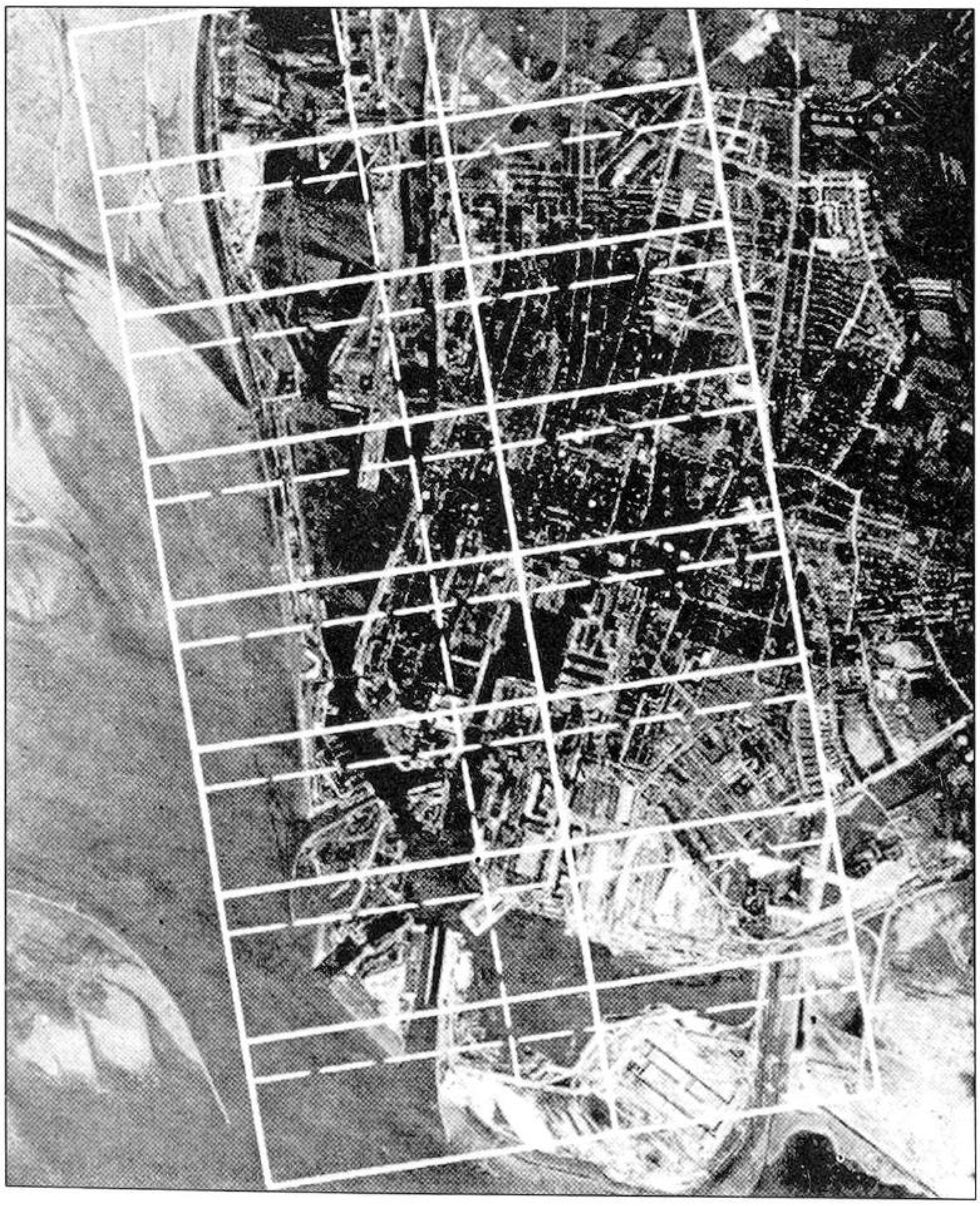


Illustration showing a dual F52 36" installation. Note the height these bulky cameras reach inside the fuselage. The only access for fitting cameras was through the radio hatches.



Vertical Cameras took images in a pattern as depicted to the right.

"The cameras were made by Williamson and came in various focal lengths, 8", 14", 24", and 36". The more usual arrangement at the end of the war would be two 36" cameras mounted so there would be a 10% overlap sideways and then the interval set to overlap 60% forwards (see photo 8 at right). This would give a three dimensional effect when a pair of photos were examined through a stereoscope. Each camera had a film magazine holding 500 exposures and the prints measured 9"x 7". The cameras were operated by the pilot who could set the interval between exposures."

WING COMMANDER J M CHECKETTS, DSO, DFC, RAF, RNZAF

Wing Commander Johnny Checketts, DSO DFC.
Checketts was also decorated by the Americans with the Silver Star, the United States' third highest military decoration, and the Polish Cross of Valour. *'It is a fine record and we are proud to count you amongst the aces of the Polish Air Force'*, wrote its Commander-in-Chief, Air Vice-Marshal Izycki.
This photo was taken at Horne Advanced Landing Ground, just prior to D-Day. (J M Checketts)

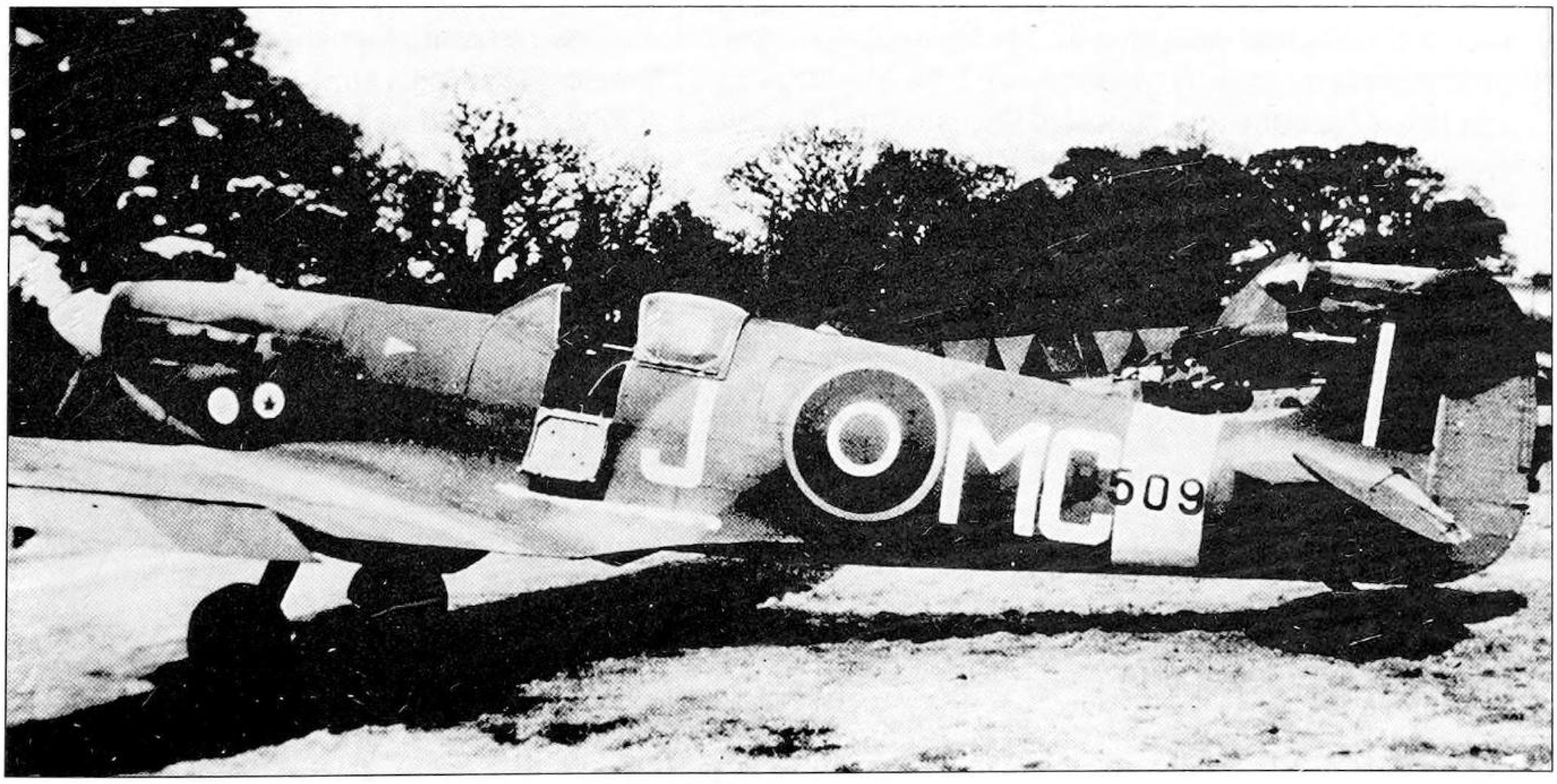
John Milne 'Johnny' Checketts sailed for Britain in July 1941 after initial pilot training in New Zealand. His first operational posting was with No.485 (NZ) Squadron in November 1941.

Following several other postings he returned to 485 as Squadron Leader in early July 1943 and commenced a run of successful combats. Checketts commanded 485 Squadron for only 10 weeks, but during that time the Squadron claimed 17 enemy aircraft destroyed, of which Checketts' share was eight. After achieving his 12th (13th by some counts) victory, a Fw 190 on 6 September, he was out of ammunition and in turn shot down by a '190 over France, Checketts suffered wounds and burns to his face and hands and only evaded capture in his injured state because a French boy on a bicycle picked him up and took him to his father's home[1]. He returned to the UK with the help of the French Resistance in November 1943.

WING LEADER ON D-DAY

By May 1944 Johnny Checketts was back on operations as Wing Leader, 142 Wing, 11 Group at Horne, a satellite field of Biggin Hill on the outskirts of London.

All three squadrons in 142 Wing still operated Spitfire Mk Vs on D-Day, 6 June 1944. It consisted of: No.130 Squadron RAF (Mk Vs until August 1944), No.303 (Polish) 'Kosciuszko' Squadron (Mk Vs until April 1945) and No.402 (RCAF) 'City of Winnipeg' Squadron (Mk Vs until July 1944).



Spitfire LF.Vc, AB509, flown by Johnny Checketts, just before 'Invasion stripes' were added, on 4 June 1944. The photo was taken at Horne and shows Checketts, as Wing Leader, had his initials as the aircraft's code letters and displays the Polish emblem of No.303 Squadron, No.402's Maple leaf and his triangular Wing Commanders pennant on the port nose. (J M Checketts via D Frowen)

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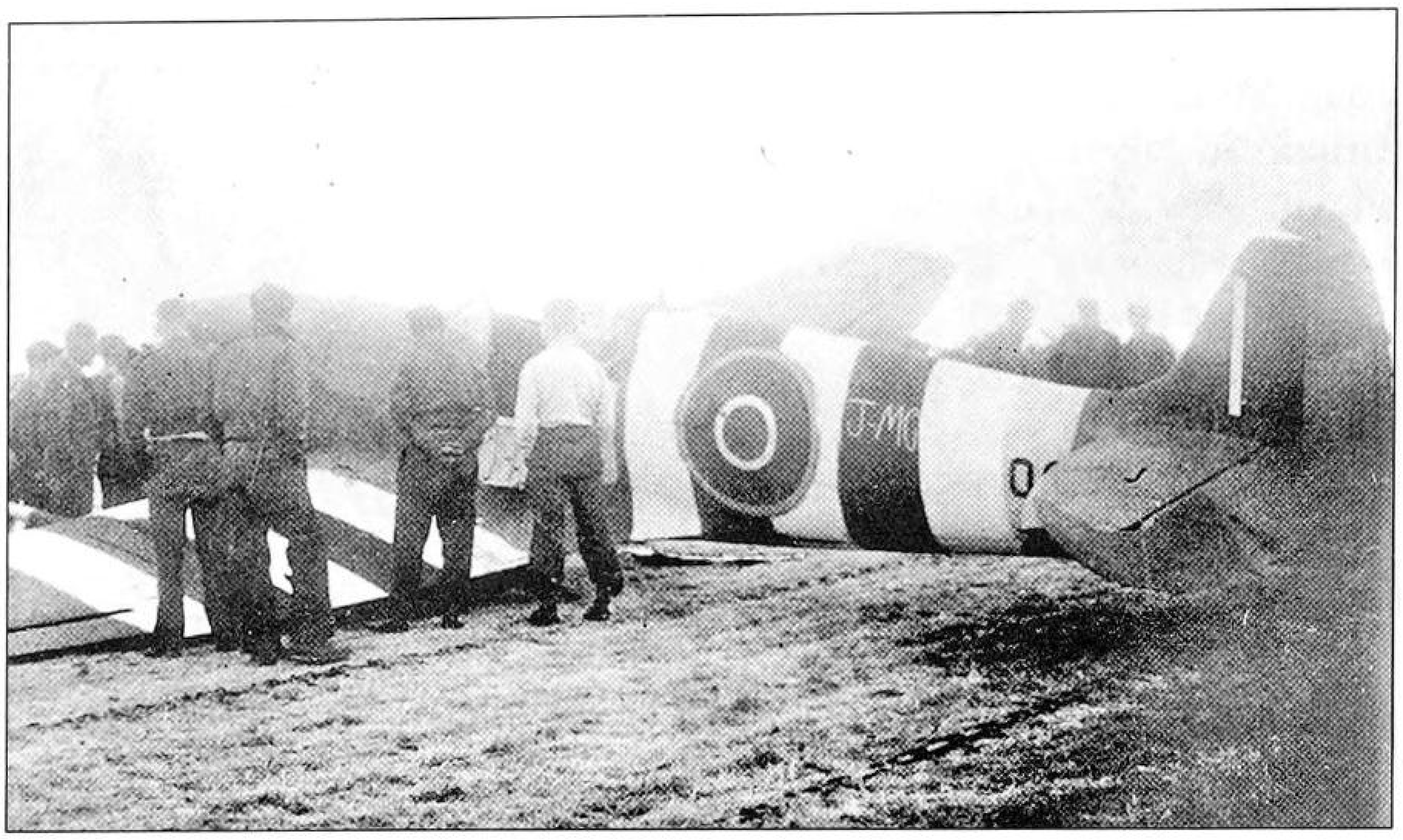
[1] 'The Road to Biggin Hill', by Vincent Orange.



Shortly after D-Day, Checketts' Spitfire Mk Vc AB509 blew a tire taking off from Horne's grass runway and the tire wound its way up the oleo leg, making it impossible to retract the undercarriage. Wing Commander Checketts landed the Spitfire and, as quickly as they could, the ground crew changed its entire port wing. This was not considered a major job by them!
Checketts flew four sorties on D-Day in this Spitfire. Note that the Invasion stripes have been applied over his code letters of 'J-MC' and these have simply been chalked onto the black stripe behind the fuselage roundel. AB509 was built as a Mk Vc and later refurbished with late 'c' wing narrow cannon bulges; the outer cannon cover stubs have been removed and it has been fitted with tailplanes of increased horn balance area. On occassions these refurbished Mk Vs had 6-stack exhausts fitted too.
AB509 was listed as being operated by No.402 (RCAF) Squadron from 22 May 1944, until being passed to No.53 OTU on 29 September 1944[1]. (J M Checketts)

The Spitfire Mk Vs had been upgraded to enhance their low level performance against Luftwaffe Fw 190s and were adequate *at low altitudes*. Their elliptical wings were 'clipped' to increase the roll rate, the supercharger impeller blades were 'cropped' to cope with increased blade tip speed resulting from an increase in manifold boost pressure and the pilots referred to them as 'clapped' because of the aircraft's age!

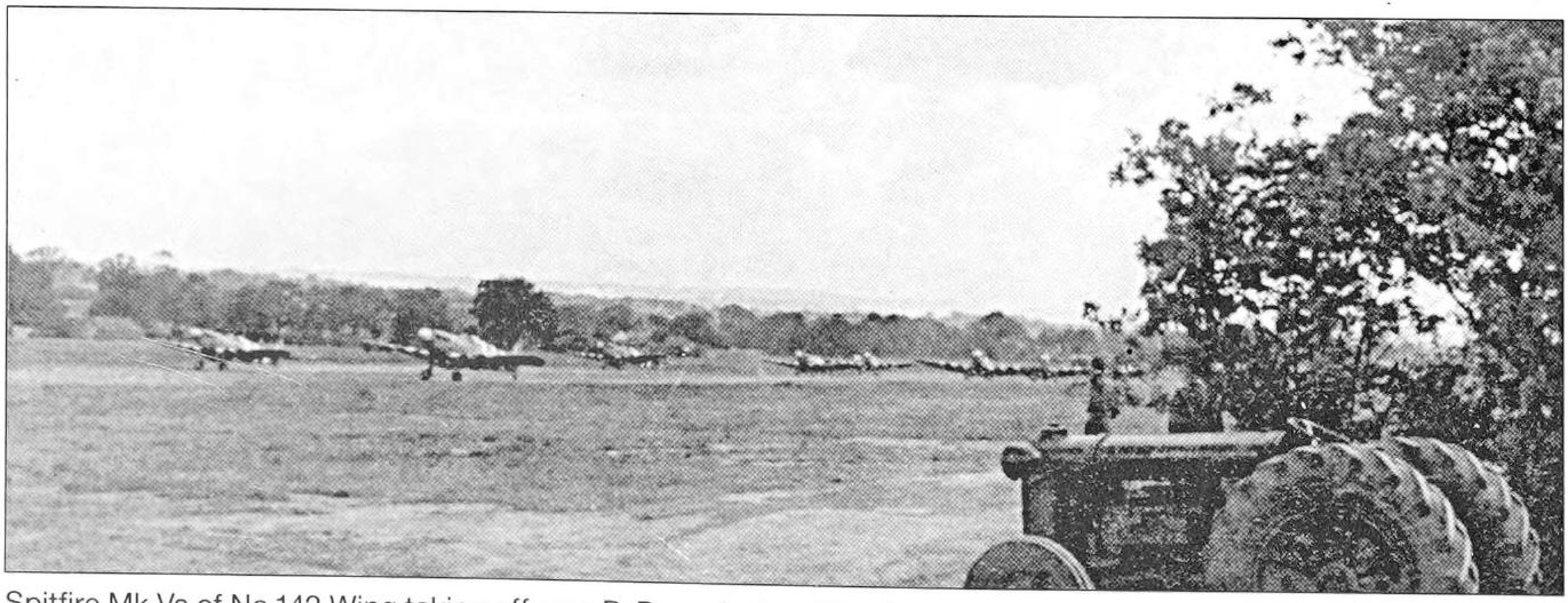
The Spitfire Mk V was not completely phased out in Western Europe until the late summer of 1944, being still considered useful for low-altitude close bomber escort and ground strikes. However, from time-to-time the 'V' squadrons still found themselves tasked with high cover and top cover escort duties and at a disadvantage if having to 'mix it' with the Fw 190 and Bf 109G at altitude.

Flying AB509 Checketts damaged a Bf 109 over the mouth of the Orne river on 8 June 1944. He also shot down V1 flying bombs on 16 and 18 June flying Mk Vs. While flying a 402 Squadron Spitfire Mk V coded 'AE-E', he destroyed a Bf 109 on 1 August 1944. This was his final victory in a Spitfire Mk V.

BETTER SPITFIRES ARRIVE

The first Squadron in the Wing to receive more modern Spitfires was No.402 which re-equiped with LF.IXs in July 1944 and then F.XIVs in August. No.130 Sqn received F.XIVs in August 1944, but No.303 soldiered on with Mk Vs until April 1945 when it re-equiped with North American P-51 Mustangs.

As two of his squadrons upgraded their aircraft Checketts acquired a Spitfire LF.IXc, ML350 and achieved his last victory in this aircraft, while operating in support of the Arnhem landings (Operation Market Garden) on 25 September 1944.



Spitfire Mk Vs of No.142 Wing taking off on a D-Day mission. (J M Checketts)

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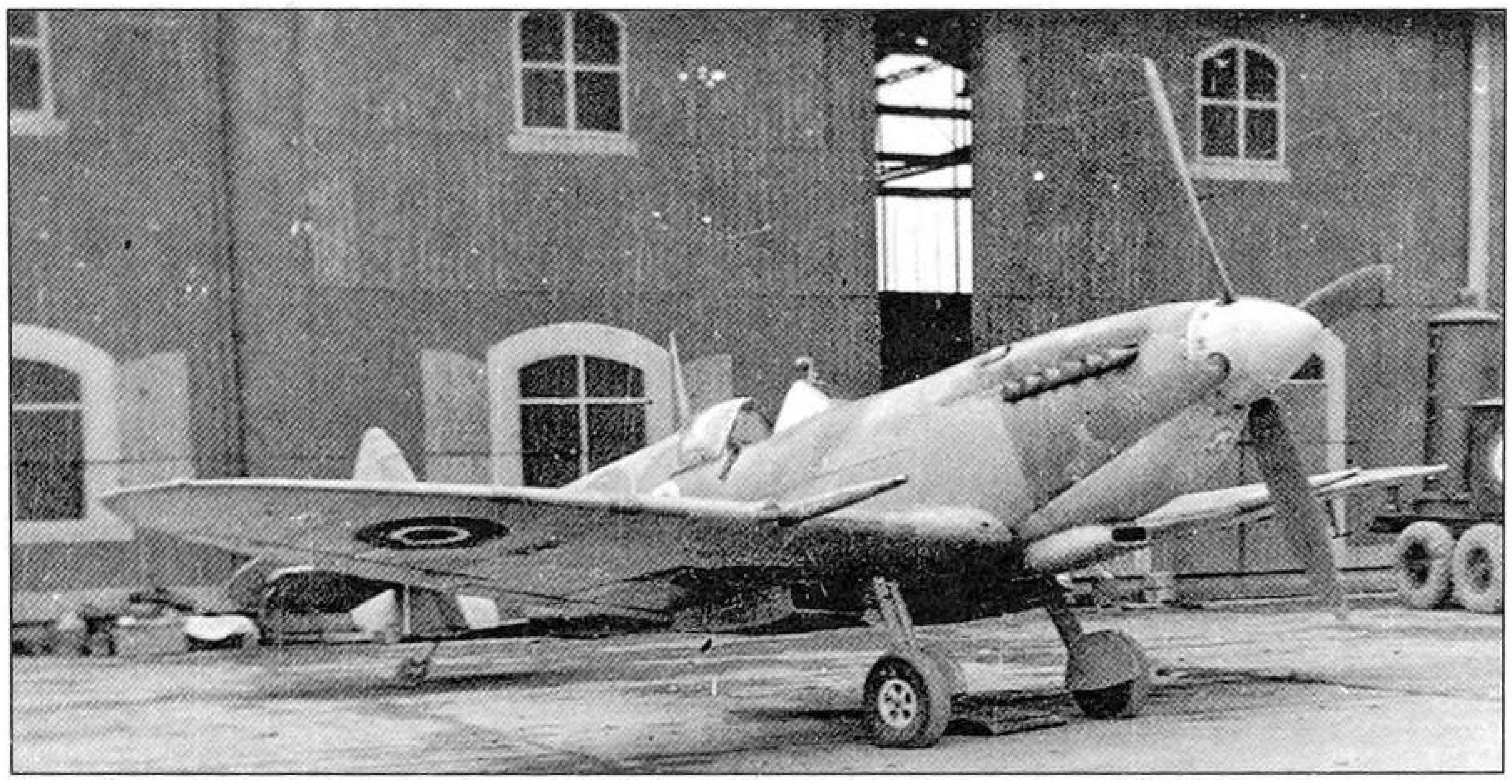
[1] Morgan E and Shacklady E. 'Spitfire the History'

SPITFIRE 'JM-C'

The four photos of ML350 'JM-C' included here were taken at Merville, France, in October 1944, during a visit by Wing Commander Checketts. By this stage of the war Spitfire Squadrons were less in combat than their Typhoon equipped ground attack counterparts. Sometimes there was time for other activities...

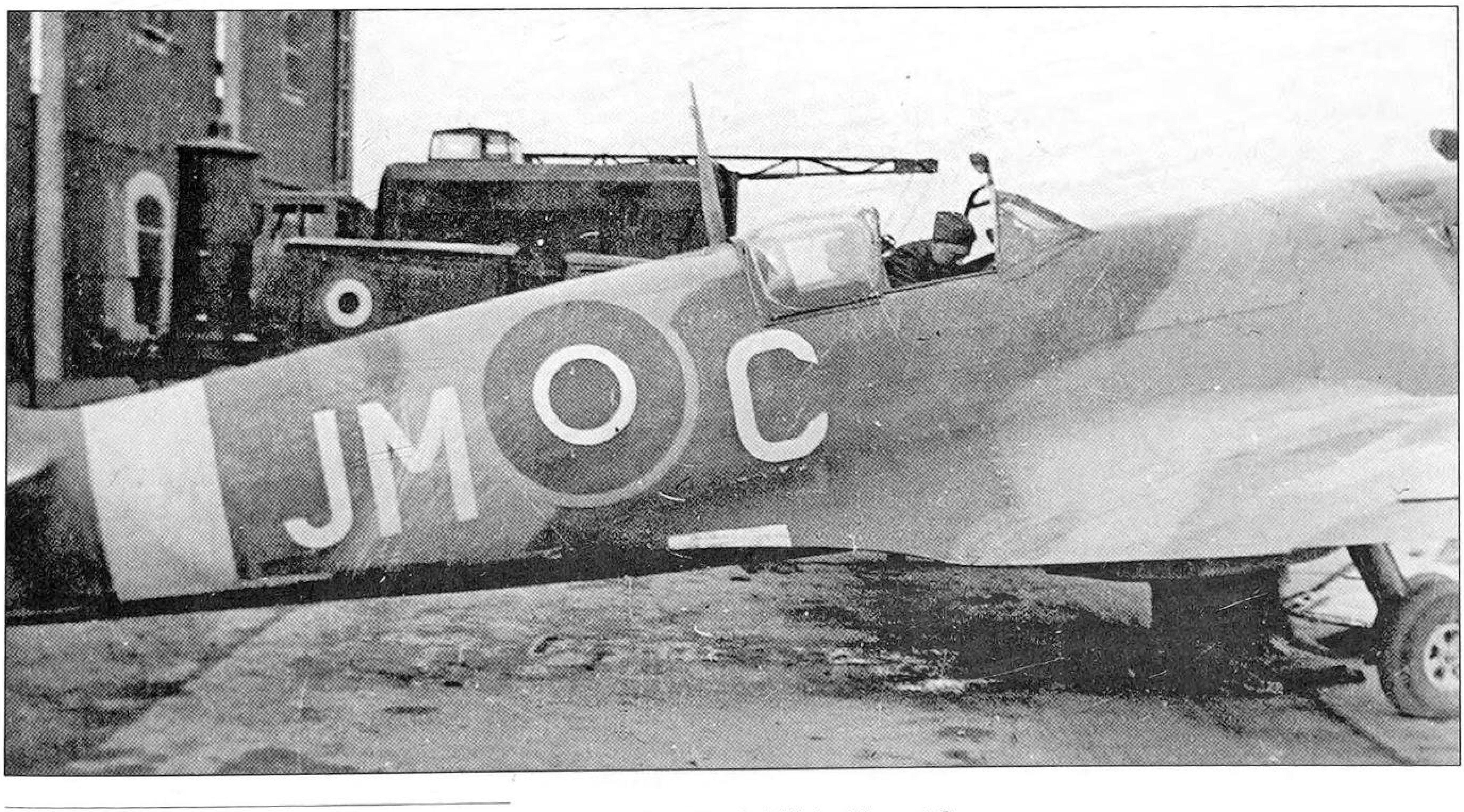


Wing Commander Checketts' Spitfire LF.IXc ML350 at Merville, October 1944. See illustration on page 40. (J M Checketts)

... From Checketts' biography.[1] Calais fell on 1 October while he was visiting a fellow New Zealander, Group Captain Desmond Scott, commander of a wing of four Typhoon squadrons at Merville, near Lille. They drove into the wrecked city and came upon a German underground bunker, Scott recalled, "full of frozen pork, blocks of apple sauce, frozen peas and case upon case of Portuguese sardines. Small mobs of young pigs were running loose among the bomb-shattered buildings. We caught one of these little porkers, put him in a box, and filled the rest of the station wagon with cases of sardines.' They returned to Merville with their loot and that night he and Johnny went to Lille, met with Alan Deere (now a staff officer with 84 Group), visited a night club and "drank more than was good for us". Next day, wrote Scott; "While we were flying in an Auster over Lille, Johnny hung his head out the window into the slipstream and appeared to be asleep. I could not resist the temptation to pull my .38 calibre Smith & Wesson from its holster, put my arm past his head, and pull the trigger. He shot bolt upright, his bloodshot eyes like pink saucers. Johnny was six years my senior, but very much a boy at heart and we were soon rocking the little 'plane with our laughter."

Post war Johnny Checketts returned to New Zealand and served in the peace-time RNZAF. He passed away in 2006.

A starboard side view of ML350 at Merville. Parts of the serial number can just be made out on the Sky fuselage band. (J M Checketts)



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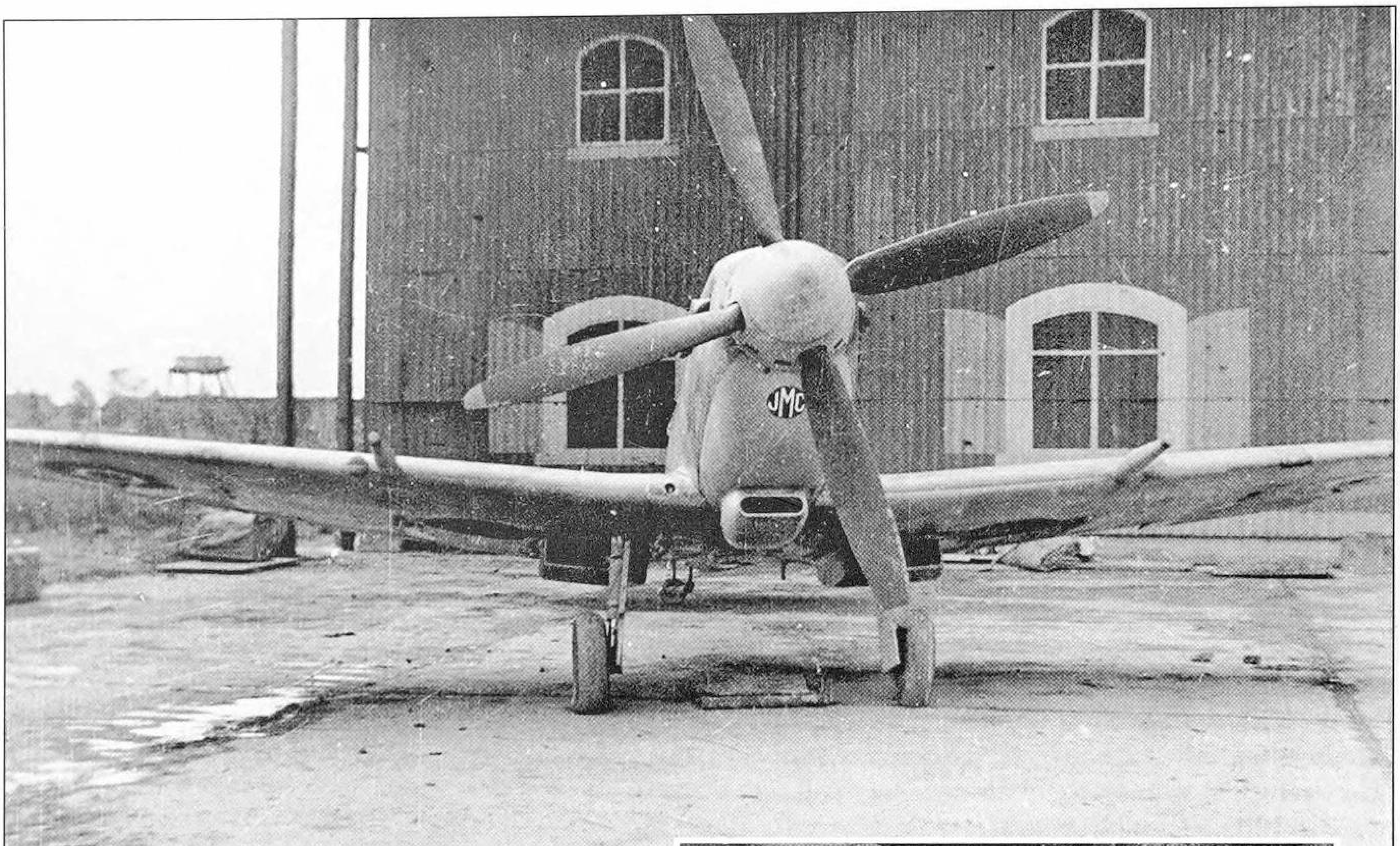
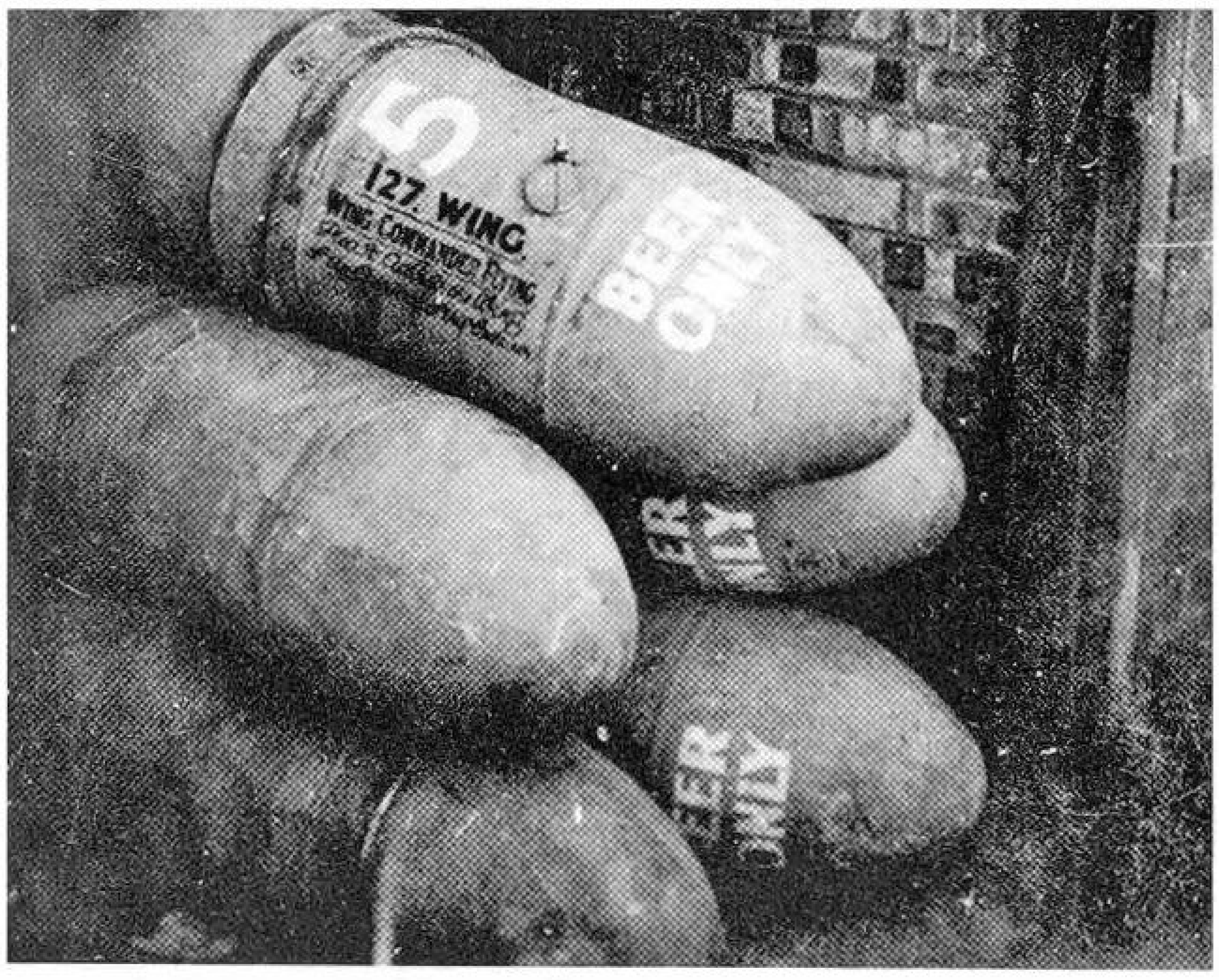
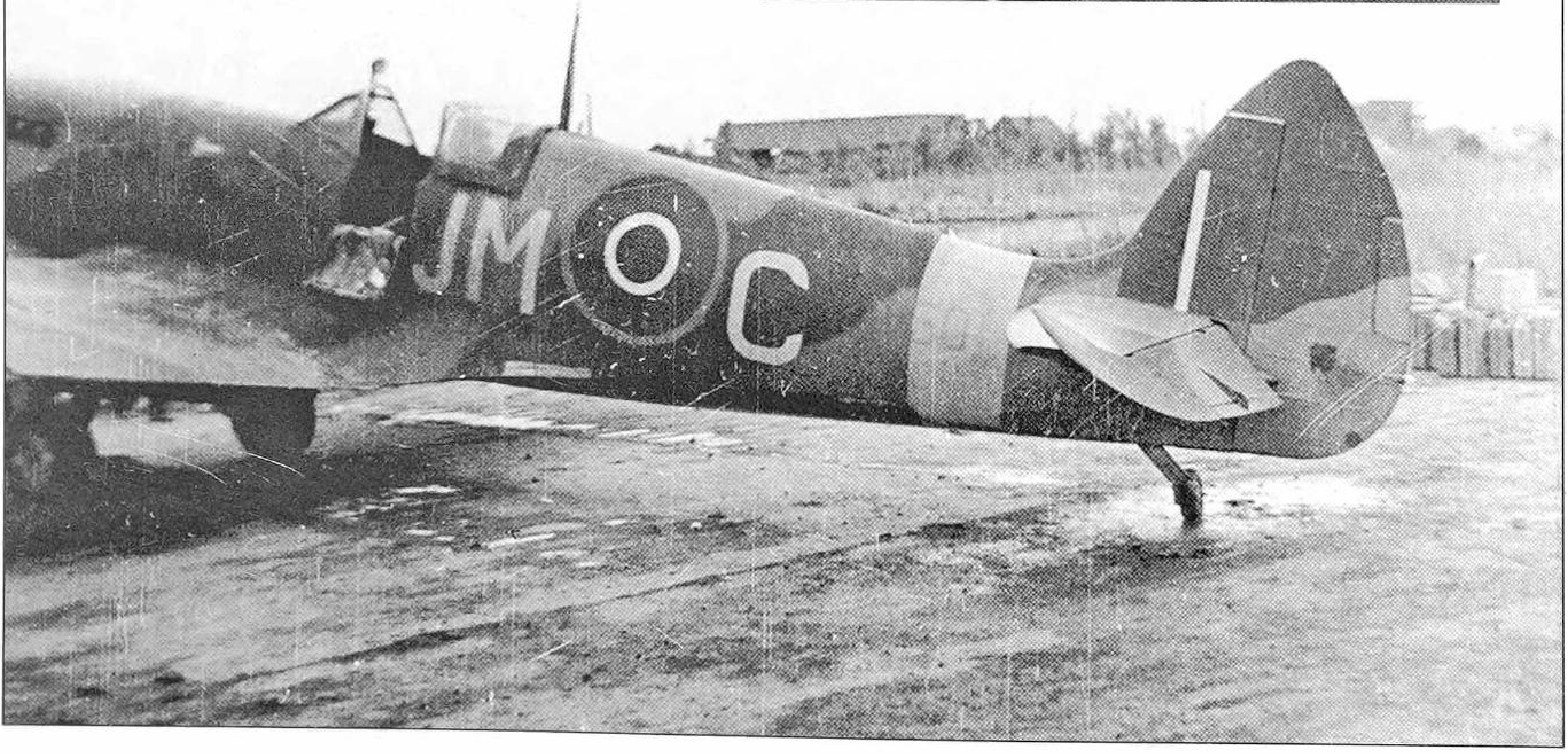
[1] For further reading see Checketts' biography, 'The Road to Biggin Hill', by Vincent Orange.



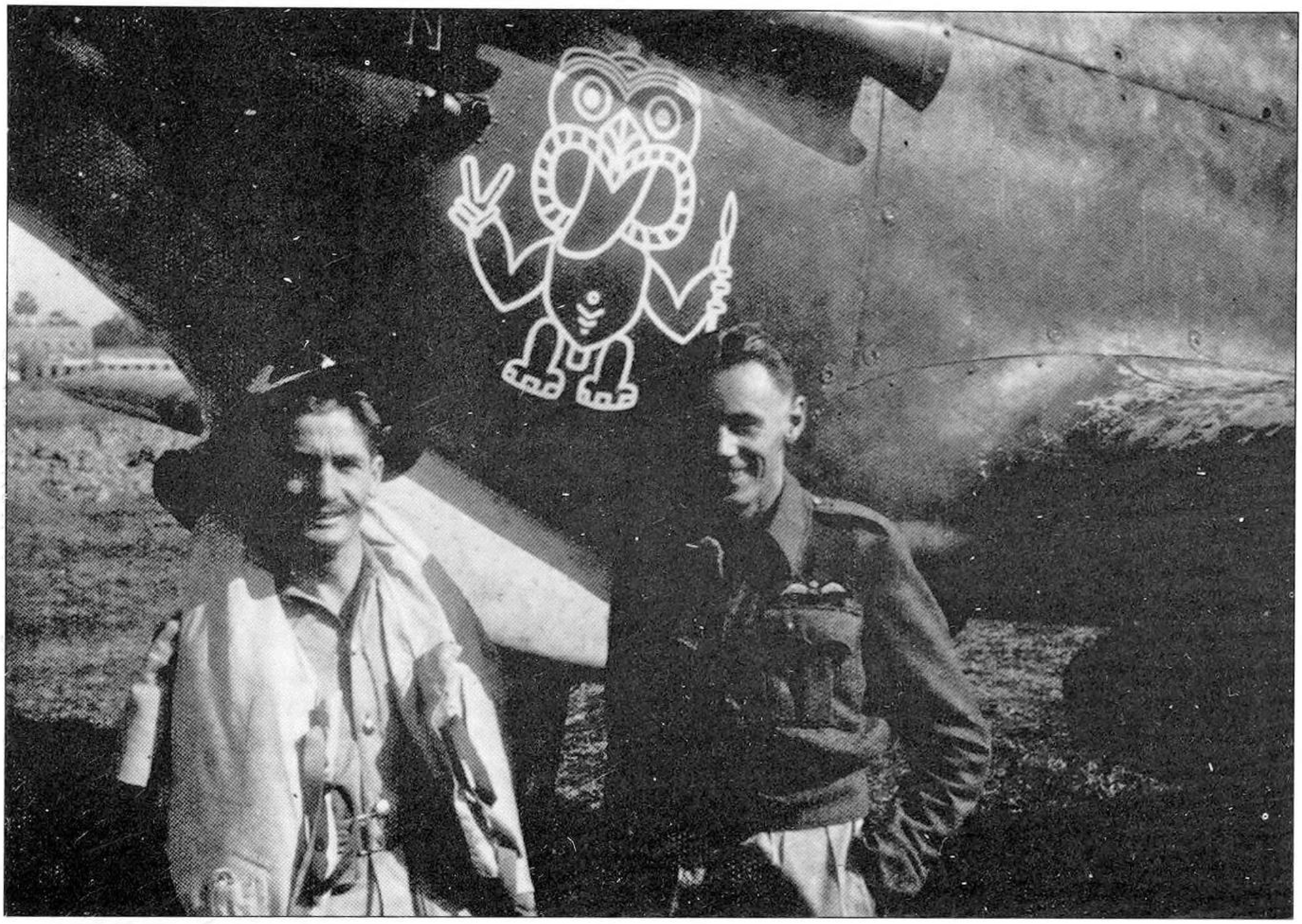

5
127 WING
WING COMMANDER FLYING
BEER ONLY

Above and below: Two more views of Checketts' Spitfire at Merville, October 1944. Note his initials repeated under the nose. (J M Checketts)

Right: A store of Spitfire droptanks modified to carry beer. Unlike some RAF Units operating in Europe post D-Day, who 'imported' beer in airborne tanks as a publicity stunt, Checketts' Wing did so on a regular basis – and they rarely ran dry! (J M Checketts)



PILOT OFFICER W H F DEAN, RNZAF



Hugh Dean, left, and Charlie Beale with Beale's Hurricane. This photo most likely dates from early 1943 as No.135 Squadron went back onto offensive operations with bomber escort, ground strafing and scrambles frequently listed in Hugh Dean's log book.
Dean painted the nose art on this aircraft. (Ross and Carol Dean)

One of the RAF Hurricane Squadrons serving in India in 1942-43 was No.135. Like No.615 mentioned later in the book, No.135 was heavily engaged in support of the Army in the first Arakan campaign from December 1942 to May 1943.

Pilot Officer W H F 'Hugh' Dean, RNZAF, was killed in action on 31 march 1943 during that campaign. His flying log documents the exhausting battle experience by soldiers and airmen alike. For most of 1942 Dean typically flew 15 operational sorties per month, but this built up late in the year and reached a climax at the time of his death. In February 1943 his log records 21 operational sorties plus various short airfield transfer flights. In March he completed 31 Operational sorties plus transfer flights (mainly to and from Hove, a small forward field where 135 Squadron maintained a detachment.

On 30 March, flying Hurricane HL791 Dean was scrambled to intercept Japanese aircraft four times for a total of 5.5 hours. The next day the battles continued and Pilot Officer Dean was killed in aerial combat.

The following is an extract from a letter Squadron member Jim McIvor wrote to Dean's brother on 6 July 1943.

"Six of us took off on the 31st March to try and intercept an early morning raid. We were just above our own lines when 16 Jap machines appeared. There was a general mix up and Hughie was not seen again after the first attack. Nobody can say with any certainty as to what happened.

Hurricane 'WK-F' of 135 Squadron at Mingaladon, March 1942. The background smoke is over Rangoon, Burma. From here the Squadron retreated in stages back to India. (Ross and Carol Dean)

Hughie apparently saw the Japs alright as his voice was heard over the wireless. His number 2, Roy Edge was also shot down. I am almost certain that Hughie thought there was time to get away after possibly one attack but did not see other enemy planes above him. His aircraft was found in hills and Hughie was buried beside it almost on the Burmese border."

Cecil 'Foxy' Fox was Dean's closest friend at the time he was killed and wrote to Dean's parents on 18 September 1943. The following is an extract.

"At the present time I can write little of the Arakan except to say that our squadron was able to score more than any two squadrons down there, Hughie led 'A' flight on many of their operations and led them very well too, during March he must have had at least fifty hours in the air, in fact he was hard to keep out of it. One day he had a go at twelve bombers on his own, came back very bucked and got rather a lecture from me".

In the letter Fox goes on to say that he has some personal things of Hugh's to return but won't risk letting them fall into the "incompetent hands of officialdom". Another letter mentions missing out on the log book as the adjutant beat them to it. However, the log book did make it home to Hugh Dean's family in New Zealand.

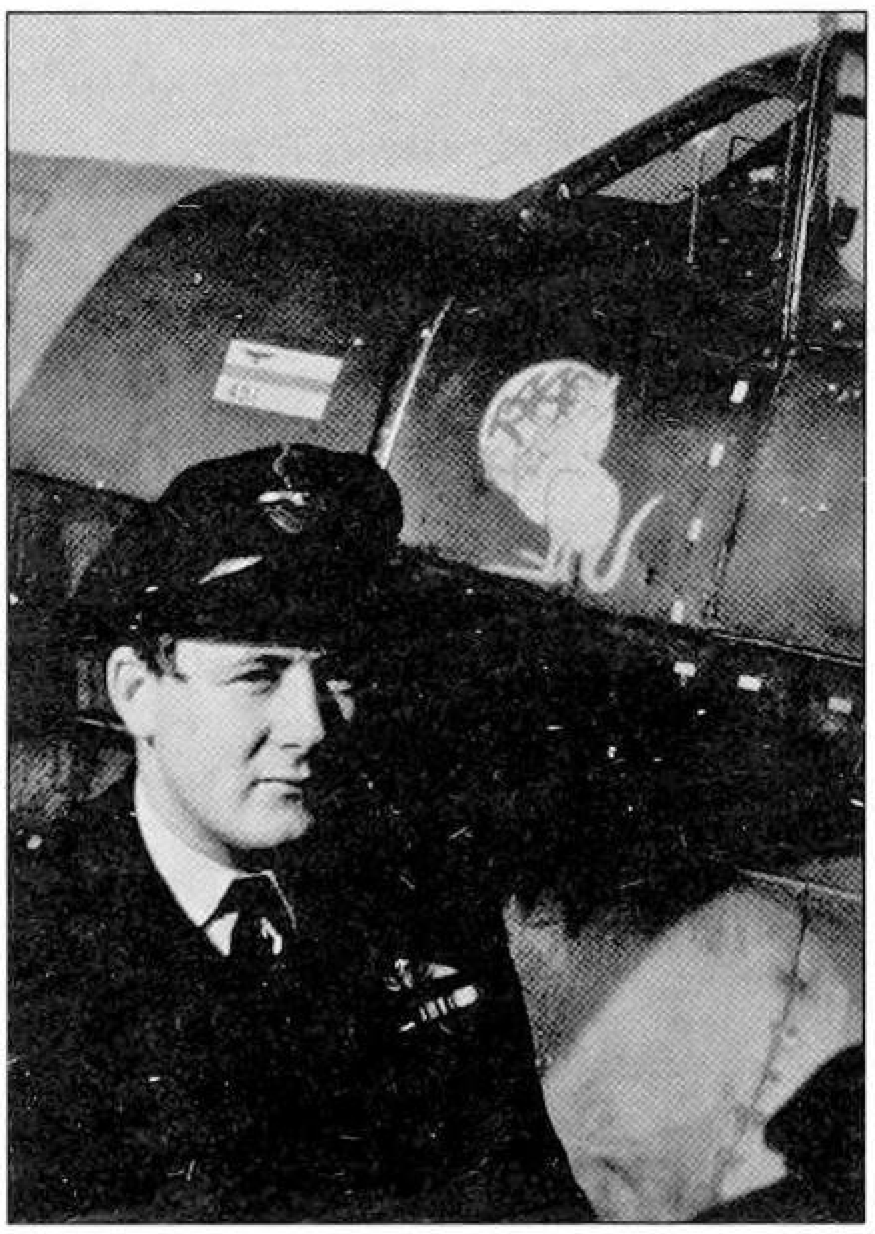
Above and below. Two photos of Bill Sykes, an Australian pilot with No.135 Squadron, in the cockpit of his Hurricane Mk II. The photos are almost certainly taken at Mingaladon where No.135 Squadron was based between January and March 1942. (Ross and Carol Dean)

SQUADRON LEADER GRAHAM FALCONER, RAAF

Graham 'Porky' Falconer was born in Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia, on 5 April 1922.

"At about age eight my parents paid for me to have a flight in Kingsford-Smith's Fokker Tri-motor the *Southern Cross* who was touring the country selling joy-rides. It was quite an experience and cost eight shillings, which was good money in those days. This may have been what gave me the idea of flying later in life."

In June 1938 he joined the 11th Light Horse Regiment of the Australian Army. Although only sixteen years old, he told the recruiting officer that he was eighteen and owned his own horse, a bonus for the Army! He was accepted. And so began the service career of Graham Falconer whose story spans the years of World War II and the occupation of both Germany and Japan by the victorious Allies.



Squadron Leader Graham Falconer, Germany, 1945. At the time of this photo Falconer commanded No.451 Squadron (RAAF) as part of the Allied occupation forces in Germany. Note No.451's unofficial insignia – a kangaroo with a joey holding a sling-shot. (J Culbert)

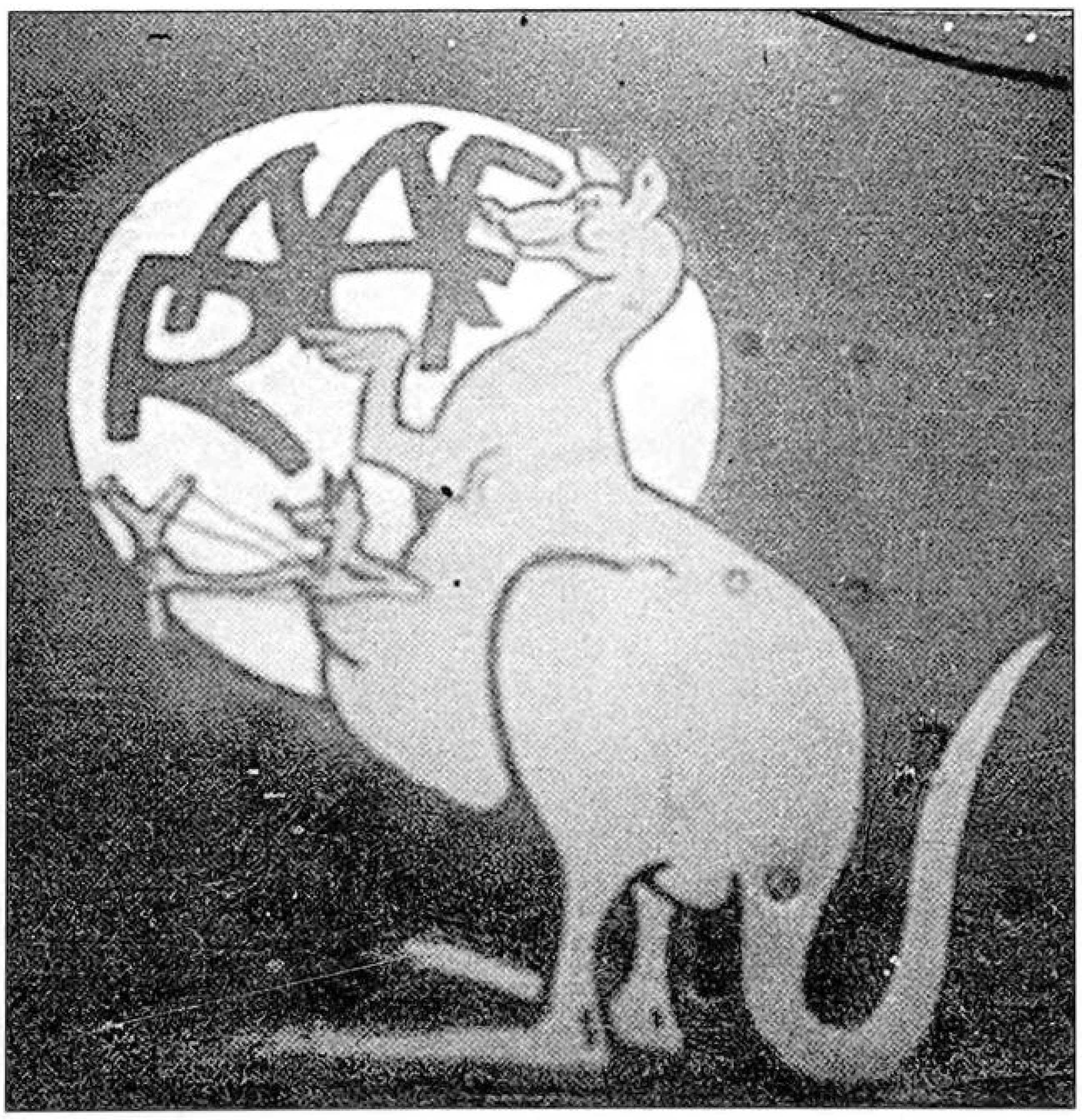
ENLISTMENT AND TRAINING

"On the 5th of April 1940 I turned 18 and wrote to the RAAF Headquarters at Creek St, Brisbane to join the Air Force as a pilot. I had already tried once before at seventeen-and-a-half but been told to come back when I was old enough. An RAAF recruiting team arrived in Toowoomba on 5 June 1940. One of the Sergeants took one look at me and told me to come back when I was old enough – my baby face! However, I had my birth certificate with me and said 'have a look at this' and was duly allowed to apply. I passed the very strict medical exam A1, plus various other tests and was eventually called up on 8 November that year. In the meantime we were required to take night classes on various aspects of flying and service life."

Falconer was first posted to No 2 Initial Training School at Bradford Park in Sydney. He was accepted for pilot training and was posted on to Tamworth air base where flying training commenced on the ubiquitous DH82 Tiger Moth.

"My flying Instructor was Flying Officer French, who was a very good pilot. Another at Tamworth was the WW1 Australian Ace Flight Lieutenant Jerry Pentland, who enlivened our days with a few stories of his early flying days. I was fortunate at this time in that my parents had given me a 1928 model Oakland Tourer Sedan and I was able to drive myself and other Toowoomba fellows home on weekends."

A closer view of No.451 Squadron's unofficial insignia. (J Culbert)



His next posting was to Amberly for advanced training on the Australian designed and built Wirraway trainer, where he passed with an above average grade. During this period Falconer experienced his first forced landing – on Bundambra Racecourse!

"I was down at almost ground level when my motor cut out. I tried to pump start it to no avail and had to force land. I touched down and charged through four fences, stopping at the last fence which was wire netting. The cockpit hood slammed shut in the landing and I had quite a job opening it – Wirraways have a habit of going up in flames if they crash! I slid down the side of the airframe and moved away from the aircraft. A crowd gathered and someone from Toowoomba who recognised me phoned my father who in turn called me to see if I was hurt. I later read a news paper report that I had been thrown clear, but it was just me getting out in a hurry!"

Graham Falconer's flying training was completed on 30 June and he was commissioned Pilot Officer next day and attached to the RAF on 17 July 1941. He and his friend Eric Evans were posted overseas and embarked from Sydney on the *Johann Van Oldenbarneveldt* for Auckland, New Zealand where they changed ships to the British ship *Dominion Monarch*.

"It was in peace time rig so Eric Evans and myself had our own cabin and an English steward to look after us. We were very well looked after."

The *Dominion Monarch* arrived in Liverpool on 2 September 1941 and Falconer was posted to No.3 PCR at Bournemouth and then on to No.52 OTU to train on Hurricanes. On 15 September he graduated from Miles Masters to Hurricanes.

"It really was a great aircraft after what I had flown before.

"My first operational posting was to No.615 County of Surrey squadron at Manston on the east coast of England. Winston Churchill was the Honorary Air Commodore of No.615 and we would often receive praise from him following operational trips well done.

"My first operational sortie was with our CO Denys Gillam, who ended the War highly decorated with the DSO, DFC and bar and AFC. He took myself and a new Norwegian pilot over Dunkirk which, by mid 1941, was supposedly the most heavily fortified port on Europe's western seaboard. I believed this when I experienced their anti-aircraft fire that day!"

HURRICANES IN WINTER

"As with other England based Hurricane Squadrons at this time, 615's main job was fighter-bomber attacks along the European coast and, because of their location, air sea rescue searches."

On 7 November 1941, 607 and 615 Squadrons attacked Le Treport in France. No.615 'softened-up' the port's anti-aircraft guns and 607 followed with bombs while Spitfire squadrons flew top-cover. On 8 November Falconer and another pilot were detailed to search for fellow Australian 'Bluey' Truscott who had to bail out over the English Channel. They were successful and guided a rescue launch to pick him up.

Falconer carried out a similar search with four others on 24 November, in marginal flying conditions, for a Pilot Officer Baring east of Dungeness. They succeeded, despite the atrocious weather and were pleased to receive a letter of commendation from Air Marshal A S Barrett, the RAF's chief of Army co-operation.

On 27 November the Squadron, which only had two Australian pilots at that time, Falconer and David McCormack, moved to Angle on the south-west coast of Wales, close to Pembroke Dock, where No.10 Squadron RAAF were based with their Sunderland flying boats. The squadron's work consisted mainly of patrolling the Irish Sea for German aircraft flying into neutral Ireland and relatively uneventful, convoy protection duties.

Falconer was not impressed by the weather!

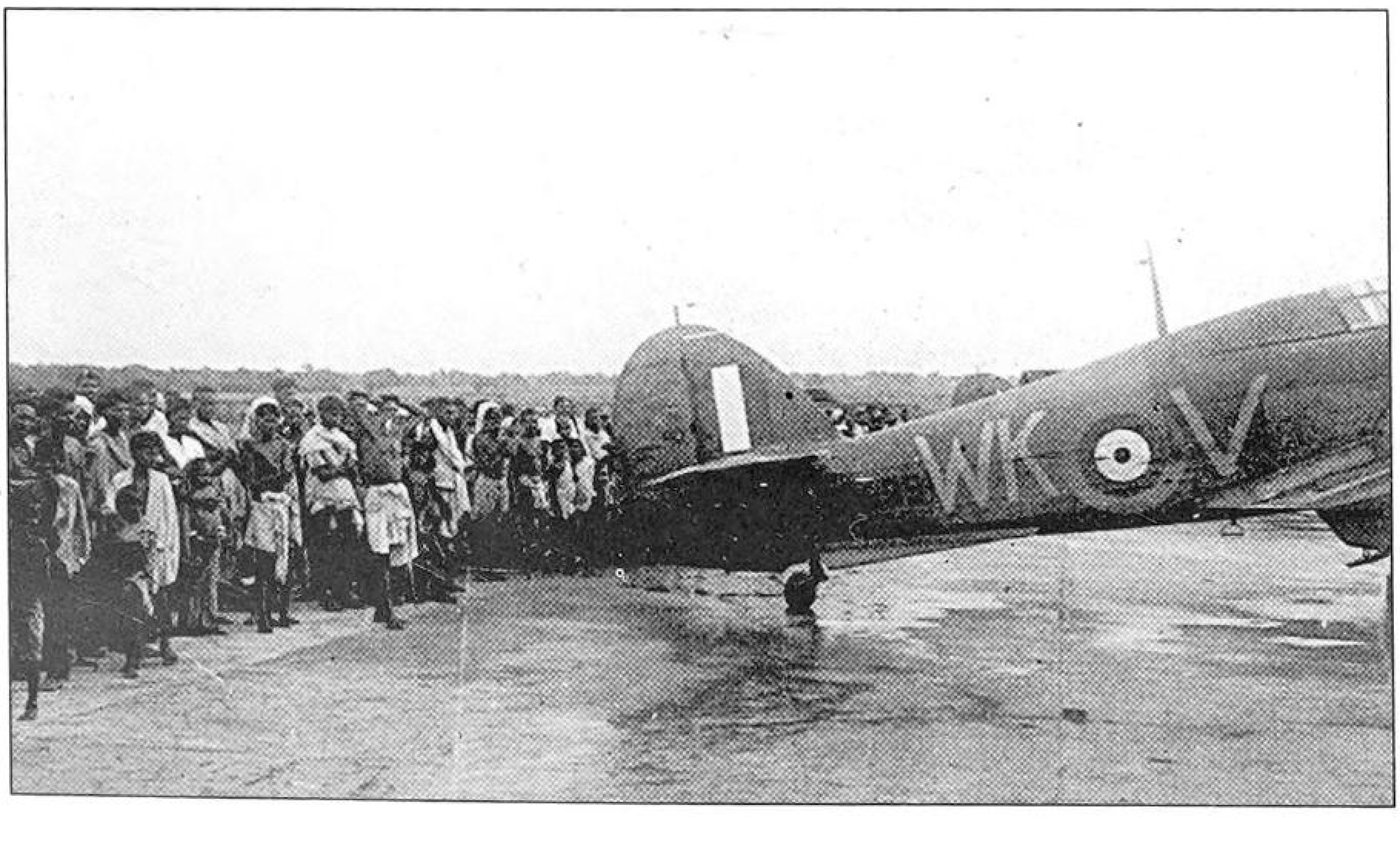
"It was midwinter and we were quartered in a very cold and damp Welsh castle. Our blue uniforms turned green with mould and our aircraft had to be tied down to large cement blocks to survive the gale force winds which blew in off the Atlantic Ocean and Irish Sea. You always hoped your engine wouldn't cutout on take off as we took off directly over the Irish Sea."

TO INDIA

On 23 January 1942 No.615 Squadron was transferred to Fairwood Common, near Swansea in South Wales; then 17 March saw all personnel issued tropical kit and the Squadron embarked on the troop ship *Johann Van Oldenbarneveldt* for an unspecified destination.

Graham Falconer, who had learned the trade of the Hurri-bomber pilot felt well prepared for whatever task lay ahead; but only their CO knew they were destined for Bombay, India where conditions could not have been more different from those in Wales.

"We departed from Bombay by coastal steamer for Drigh Road at the Port of Karachi. The trip was made more pleasant by the group of English nurses we had travelling with us. To add to our enjoyment of the British



Hurricane Mk II 'WK-V' of 135 Squadron which was heavily involved in the India/Burma campaign well before No.615 arrived in August 1942.
This Hurricane is possible BR996 which appears in Pilot Officer Hugh Dean's log book on 6 May 1942 while No.135 was based at Dum Dum, Calcutta. The squadron had retreated from Burma in March that year and was rebuilt to full strength at Dum Dum. (Ross and Carol Dean)

PILOT-
K.A. RUTHERFORD
CANTERBURY. N.Z.

Another Hurricane Squadron operating over Burma/India before 615 Squadron arrived was No.67. Here Ken Rutherford, from Hawarden, Canterbury, New Zealand sits in the cockpit of his 67 Squadron Hurricane Mk IIc. This photo was most likely taken at Alapore in June 1942 when the Squadron replaced its Mk IIBs for IIc's. (C V Bargh)

Raj, we were entertained at the Karachi Boat Club and rather spoiled, making leaving very hard.

"The squadron's Hurricanes were reassembled at Drigh Road and fitted with long range tanks. From our relaxed sojourn in Karachi the squadron flew east on a four day staged flight to the war against Japan, in the skies over Burma. We went via Jodphur, New Delhi (over the Taj Mahal), Cawnpore, Ondal, Asansol, Dum Dum, Alipore and finally Jessores, with the Hurricanes generally performing well.

"Conditions on forward airstrips were extremely primitive with Jessores still under construction by local labourers when we arrived. As the Squadron worked up and entered the fray, accidents happened. On 15 August 1942 I was scrambled and felt a bump as I accelerated down the runway. When I returned from the sortie I was told that I had one 'wog' confirmed (killed). Evidently a chap stood up to be seen and my wing scalped him. Very unfortunate for him and his family, but they had been warned."

Graham Falconer's first sortie from a Burmese airfield was on 28 October 1942 when the squadron flew into Chittagong via Feni. They refuelled and successfully completed a fighter sweep down the Naf Peninsula just north of Akyab.

For the next year, except when the monsoons kept them back from the front the squadron fought the Japanese, performing all manner of tasks – intercepting air raids, ground attack, bomber escort etc. Losses due to bad weather were just as frequent as those from combat. Falconer survived however, and found himself promoted to Flight Lieutenant on 1 July 1943.

SPITFIRES AT LAST

October 1943 may be viewed as the month the balance of air power, over Burma, tipped forever in the Allies' favour. As the monsoon season reduced flying to a minimum 615 Squadron was pulled back from the front line and re-equipped with Spitfire Mk Vcs. Like Lawrence Weggery (see page 50), Falconer found the Spitfire a big improvement, however… "We delivered our old Hurricanes to squadrons still flying them and for me it felt like saying goodbye to an old and trusted friend. Even after flying Spitfires and Mustangs I still have a soft

No.615 Squadron pilots outside their dispersal hut, Dohazari, South East Bengal, India, December 1943. From the left, Flight Lieutenant Paul Louis (UK), Don Aurisch (UK), W (Bill) Hyde (UK), Hugh Cronk (Canada), Flying Officer Lawrence Weggery (NZ), unknown, Kevin Gannon (Aust), unknown, Flight Lieutenant Graham Falconer (Aust). (SLE Weggery)

spot for the Hurricane because it could take an awful lot of punishment and still keep flying. They actually shot down more enemy aircraft in the Battle of Britain than the Spitfire!"

FATE TAKES A HAND

"On 1 November 615 moved forward to Chittagong and on the 6th I was flying a practice interception when I felt a terrible pain in my side, at about 4.30PM. I landed and had to be helped from the cockpit – by 7PM my appendix had been removed! I had no previous pain to warn me and like so many other occasions, luck was on my side. The doctor told me I was lucky the appendix had not burst whilst flying."

Falconer was sent north to Darjeeling, the summer home to many 'Pukka sahibs' (English expatriates), to convalesce. "It was a lovely spot and Mt Everest could be seen on a clear day."

He returned to flying duties on the 21 December and took part in repelling Japanese air raids on 23, 25, 28 and 29 December.

"Dave McCormack was now CO and I commanded 'A' flight and Kevin Gannon 'B' flight. Nice to have three Australians in charge of an RAF Squadron! At one stage in India we had 13 Australian pilots on the squadron."

Other squadrons equipped with Spitfire Mk VIIIs were taking up the air superiority role over the India/Burma front and 615 Squadron's work gradually changed, with Falconer's log book recording increasing bomber and transport escort work from March onwards.

"On 21 February I hitched a ride back to Calcutta (for a day's leave) in a Vengeance dive bomber. I take my hat off to the blokes who flew them."

Through March and early April 1944 Falconer's log records frequent Vultee Vengeance escort patrols over the Imphal Valley and on 25 April an air battle where he claimed a damaged Nakajima Ki43. As March gave way to April the emphasis of 615 Squadron's work again changed, this time to escorting C-47s which were either dropping supplies to the 'Chindits' by parachute or flying supplies into the Broadway airstrip hacked from the Burmese jungle.

Squadron Leader McCormack ended up being hospitalised on 29 May, after a dog-fight with a Ki43, giving Graham Falconer his chance to command the squadron until McCormack returned, on 5 June.

June and July saw the continuation of the squadron's escort work with occasional air combats with Japanese fighters and an increased role in ground attack, supporting the 14th Army.

August 2 1944, saw Flight Lieutenant Graham Falconer fly his last operation with 615 Squadron before being posted to the Middle East as an instructor, along with 'Nappy' Carroll and Johnny Oldham. All three had flown approx-imately 300 operational hours and weren't allowed to do any more.

Falconer departed Palel, the squadron's base, on 4 August and was on a ship bound for the Middle East when 615 Squadron lost eight aircraft and four pilots to a monsoon storm. Apparently sixteen Spitfires led by Squadron Leader McCormack were engulfed by monsoon clouds, losing half the formation including McCormack and two other Australians. The RAF hunted for Falconer to take command, but to no avail. He was already in the Middle East and the job went to someone else.

"It was a sad way to die for David (McCormack) who had done so much in the war and been decorated with the DFC."

SERVING IN THE FAR EAST

"I suffered dengue fever at one time which, fortunately, unlike malaria is not recurring. Life on forward airstrips was primitive and consisted of flying, waiting at readiness and perhaps reading or sharing the odd bottle of cheap Indian gin, off duty, to try and relax. At night we were so tired we just slept. It was not easy, but you got used to it. We were still better off than the army boys!

"Due to the war in Europe we were very short of men and supplies early on in the campaign and to some extent felt like a forgotten force. However, the situation improved as the war situation in Europe eased."

Arriving in the Middle East, Falconer decide he much preferred to serve in Britain and 'talked' his way back there. He was promoted to Squadron Leader and posted as Chief Flying Instructor for the third (final), phase of pilot training at 58 OTU at Poulton, Cheshire, in March 1945.

"In March I did a bit of flying in Mustangs and thought they were very good."

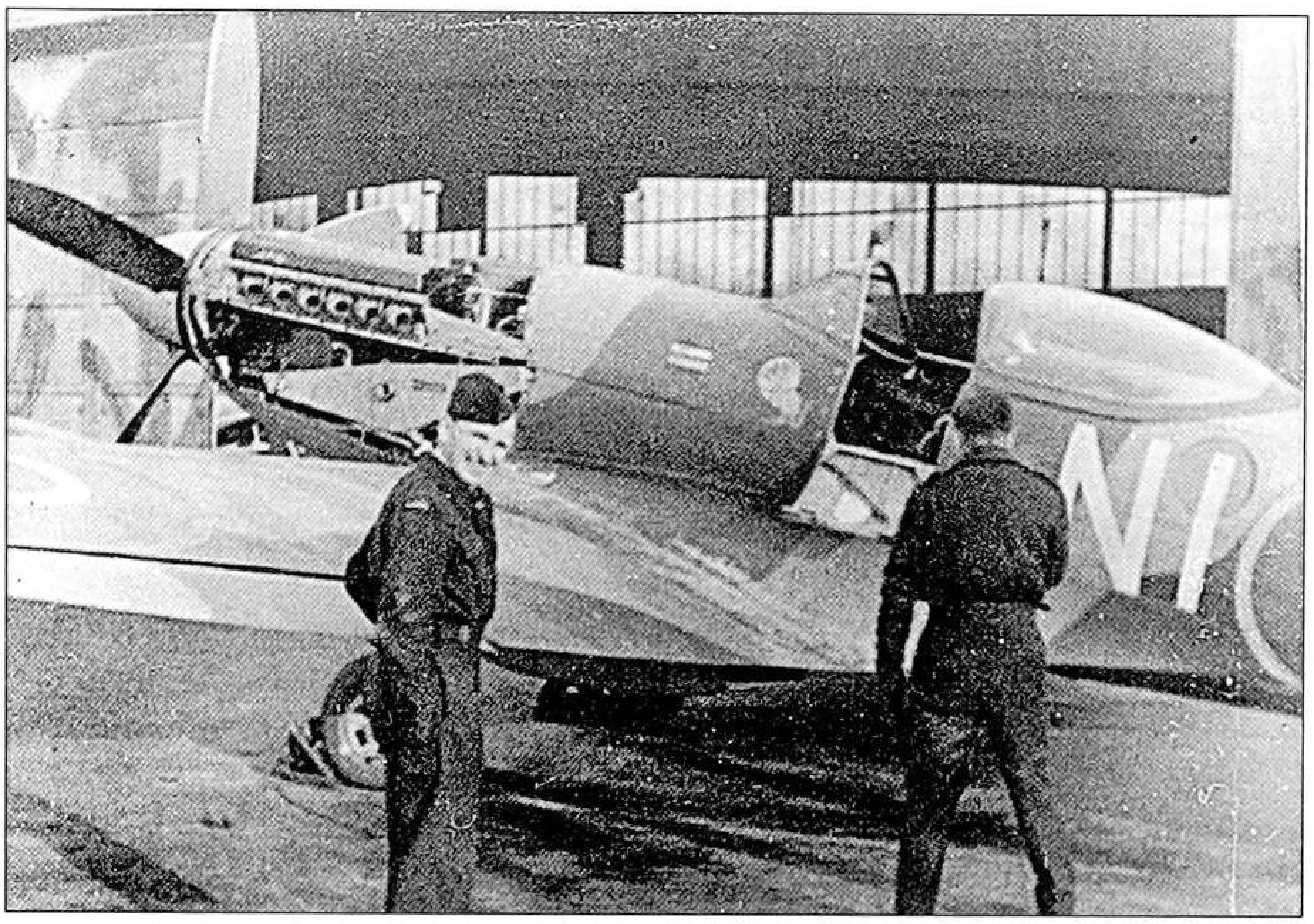
Other training jobs followed and with the war in Europe won, the job of 'winning the peace' began.

TO GERMANY

In September 1945, Graham Falconer was given command of No.451 Squadron RAAF, flying Spitfire Mk XIVs. The Squadron formed part of the Australian contingent of the British Occupational Forces; making him the last commanding officer before 451 was disbanded, on 21 January 1946.

"No.451 Squadron had a good war record and a great lot of chaps. I felt proud to be with them. On 17 September we flew into the ex *Luftwaffe* base at Fassberg, 95km south of Hamburg and were there until 5 October, when we were moved to Wunstorf (near Hanover) and a lake called Steinhunder Meer, used as a recreational resort by the British forces stationed there."

A DEVASTATED GERMANY



Spitfire FR.XIV NH919 flown by Squadron Leader Graham 'Porky' Falconer, leader of No.451 Squadron with the Australian contingent of the Allied Occupation Forces in Germany, 1945. (L Richards)

Most of 451's time in Germany was in winter, with fog and freezing conditions making taking off and landing on the icy runways extremely dangerous.

"Berlin was terribly knocked about and I don't recall seeing a single undamaged building. Germany had been a beautiful country and it was a pity we ever went to war against them.

"While in Berlin on one occasion, I was called back to Wunstorf to attend a conference and as flying was inadvisable due to poor weather I had to travel by road. Part of the journey was through Russian held territory and was considered the most dangerous part of the trip, so I had to have another officer accompany me. We armed ourselves with rifles, revolvers and a tommy gun. Evidently there were a few deserters from different sectors who had become 'highwaymen' and stopped, robbed and killed travellers. We were not allowed to stop anywhere except at armed sector posts. As it happened the only trouble we encountered was caused by the Hitler Youth in Berlin. The older people just seemed glad the war was over."

On another occasion whilst based at Wunstorf, Falconer and some fellow officers were taken to see the infamous Belsen concentration camp, situated halfway between Hanover and Hamburg. Although it was now four months after the end of the war it still left a profound and lasting impression on him. "There were very large graves with signs saying '1000 buried here,' or whatever the toll was."

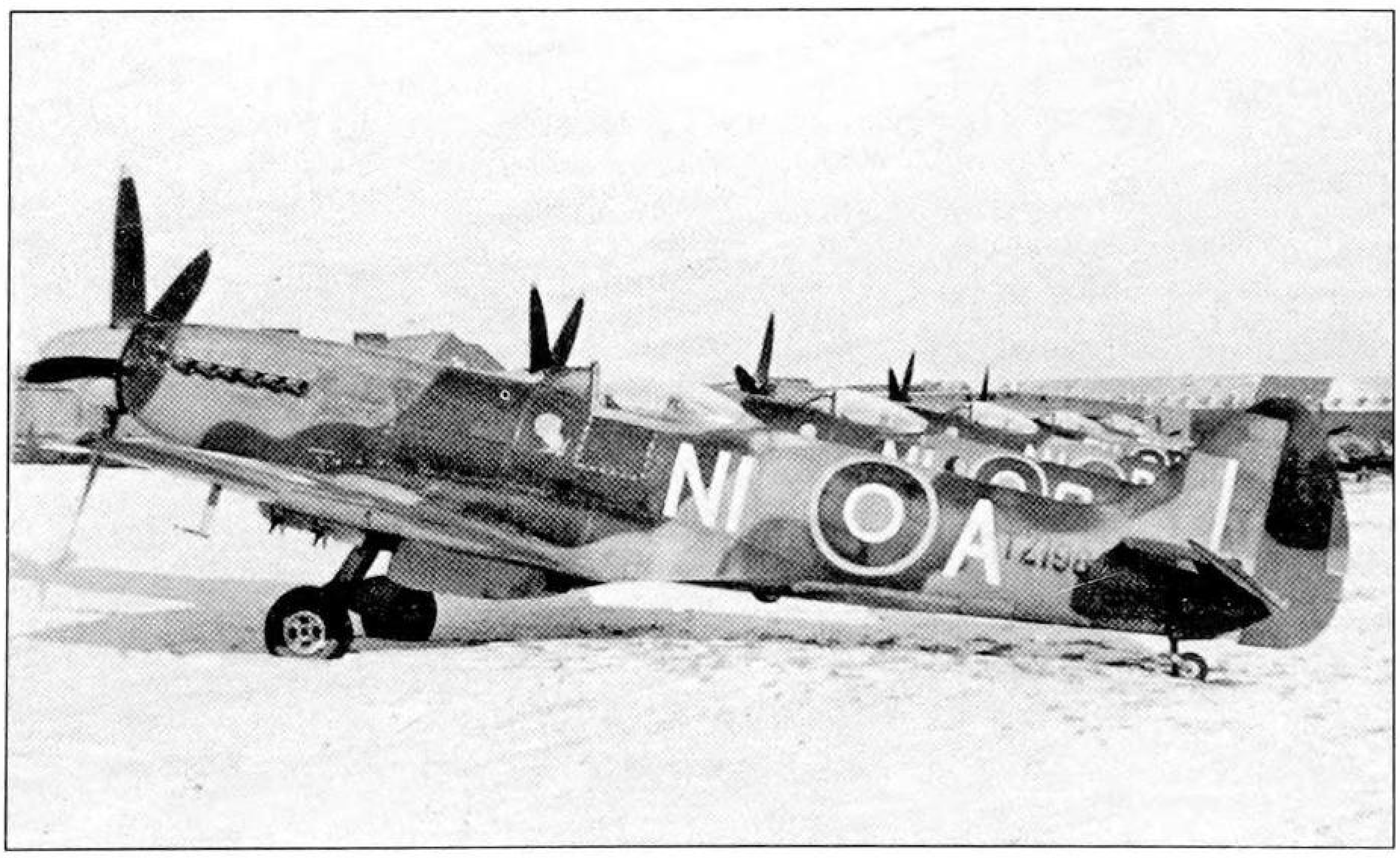
Flight Lieutenant Warren Thomas who also visited Belsen with Falconer, observed "The ovens were there for all to see, as was a huge pile of shoes about 20 ft high." We were fumigated with DDT powder on entering and leaving.[1]

"As sickening as the experience was, it was much worse when the trials of Camp commandant Joseph Kramer and his assistants Irma Grese and Ilsa Koch commenced at nearby Luneberg Heath and the most horrific evidence was reported daily."

Falconer continues, "we saw some of the ex inmates living in the old guards' quarters. They were just skin and bone. We were not allowed to talk to them, anyhow what could you say?"

On the 12 October Falconer flew his Spitfire FR.XIV up to Berlin to inspect Gatow Airport which was to be No.451's final home. "I have never seen a place so damaged, it was just a complete ruin. Of course it had been terribly heavily bombed and shelled by the allied forces."

Spitfire FR.XIV, TZ198 wearing 451 Squadron codes 'NI-A'. It is shown here after being passed to 443 (RCAF) Squadron in January 1946, but before the Canadians applied their own squadron codes. (R Bracken)



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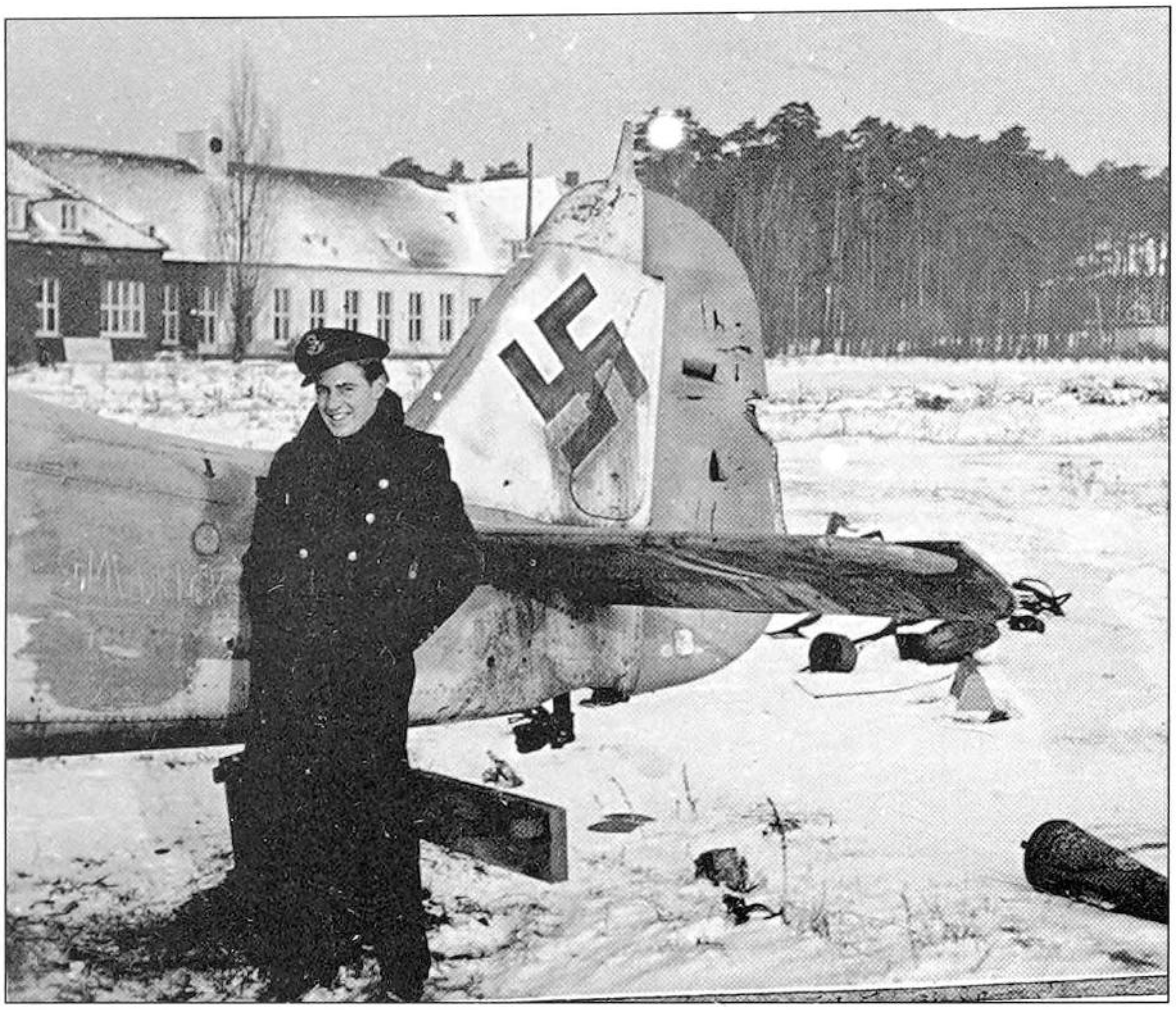
[1] Bankstown to Berlin, by Lenard Barton

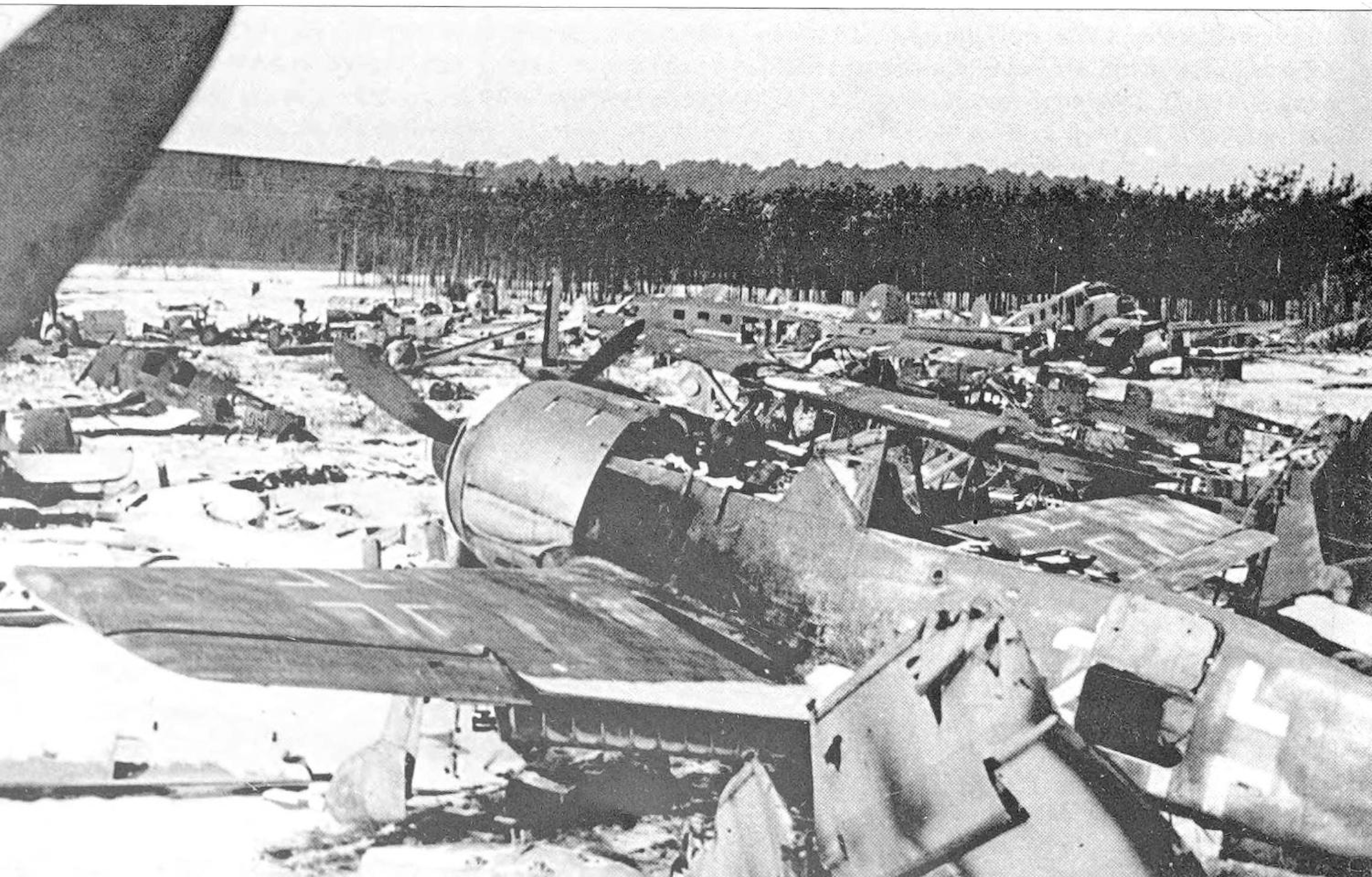


Above. A 451 Squadron member stands beside the tail of Fw 190 'Yellow 13' which appears in the photo below, right.
Below and right. Two more photos of the scrap yard at Berlin-Gatow.
Most of the aircraft at the Gatow dump were Klemm Kl35 trainers, of which a high proportion were ex *Luftkriegsschule* 2, which was located at this airfield until April 1945. Identifiable are SG+FA, DL (or SL)+UI, SL+UQ and CC+??. Note the Caudron C.445s behind Fw190 'White 2'. *Luftwaffe* schools used hundreds of these French machines but they were rarely photographed. (Caption information, Christian Kättlitz and Marc-André Haldimann. Photos, Lindsay Richards)

According to Warren Thomas, "Everything in Germany at that time was black market and cigarettes were the most valuable commodity. The English pound was worth about 50 marks and a packet of cigarettes worth about 200 marks! It seemed that cigarettes were used for trading, not smoking!"

REPATRIATION TO AUSTRALIA

On 16 December Falconer was knocked down by a car and suffered a broken kneecap. He was hospitalised in England and was still there when 451 Squadron disbanded. On 15 March 1946 he headed for home on the Royal Navy carrier *Victorious*. The carrier was loaded with surplus aircraft which were pushed over the back in deep water. The same procedure was followed in Bombay.



IN JAPAN WITH 82 SQUADRON, RAAF

After the war Graham Falconer intended to make the Air Force his career and, following several different training appointments, he was posted to Japan as commanding officer of 82 Squadron, flying Australian built CAC P-51D Mustangs. He was one of only a few men to serve in the occupation forces in both Germany and Japan and noticed various similarities and differences. As in Germany they were not encouraged to mix much with the local people.

"As officers we had Japanese girls to do our washing and that sort of thing but generally we could not speak each other's language, which made it awkward telling them what to do. One evening the COs of No.76, 77 and 82 Squadrons, who all flew Mustangs incidentally, were invited to dinner at the local mayor's house. We did not feel like taking our shoes off, but seeing as it was the local custom we did so. The dinner was quite pleasant but very stiff. I do recall enjoying enormous tasty oysters from a nearby coastal town. In Japan flying consisted of 'showing the flag' – flights simply to remind the Japanese of the allies' presence, with each squadron expected to take turns flying over Tokyo for this reason.

"I arrived at Hiroshima, Japan on the 21 January 1947 on the troopship Manoora. There we really saw what the atom bomb had done. Truly frightening!

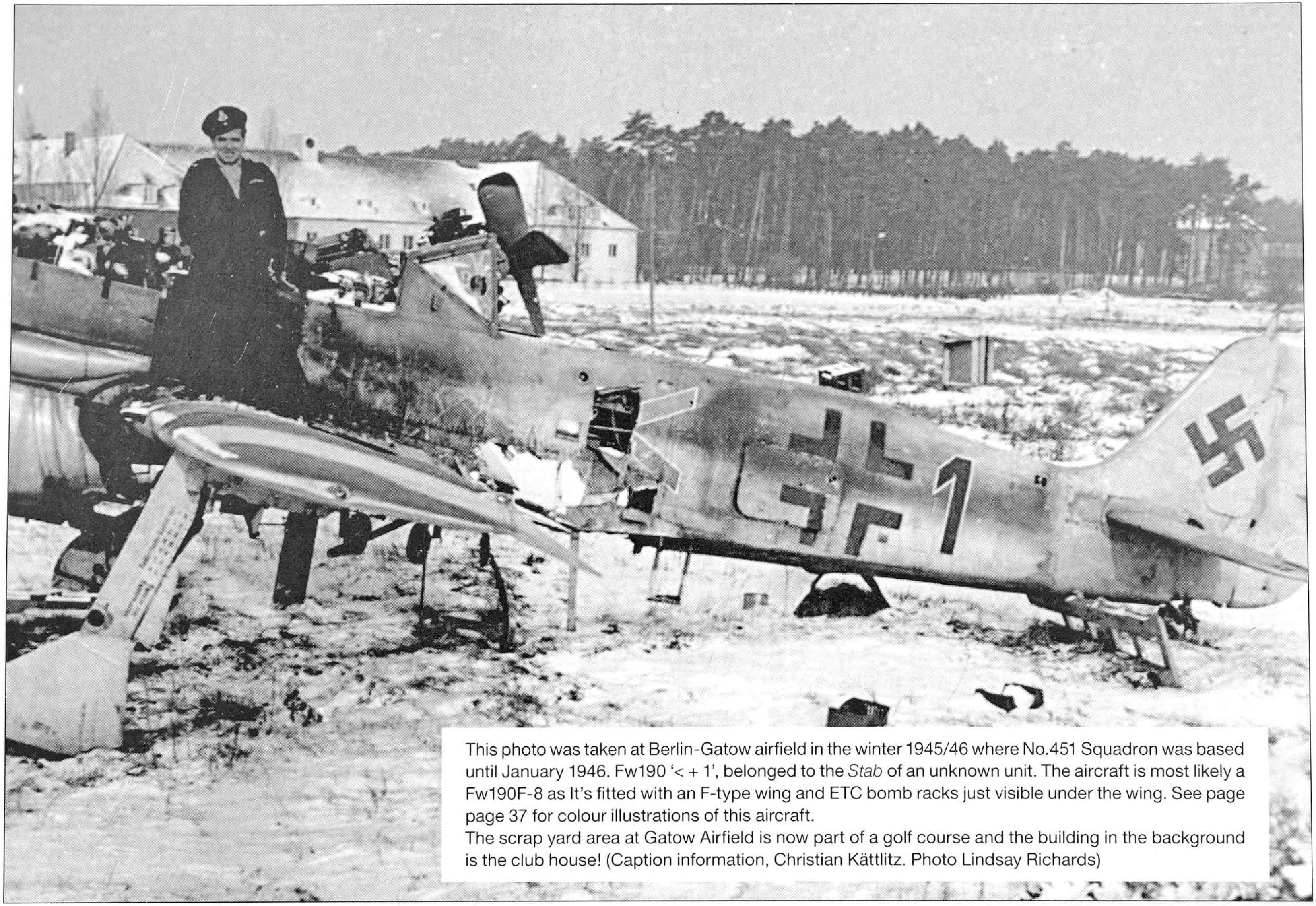
On one occasion he and three other Australian officers were invited to the wedding of an American pilot stationed on a southern Japanese island.

"When we arrived there, each in our own Mustang, we were each handed a can of beer. This was about 1PM and we were never without a drink in our hand until 3AM the next morning! We slept for three hours, were given breakfast, climbed into our aircraft, were handed yet another can of beer, consumed this and then flew to our base! Arriving home we formed a 'tight' formation and landed! Everyone said it was the worst formation they had ever seen, what could they expect!"

A CLOSING THOUGHT

"I do not like war for obvious reasons, but if necessary I would go again. We thought we were fighting for a better world, but now I wonder. Being an officer throughout my career I felt that all air crew should be commissioned officers. We flew, lived and died together, so why not?"

Diabetes prematurely ended Graham Falconer's Air Force career in March 1947. He had married Doreen Thomas in England in 1942 and they had a son. Later he married June Chote, in Australia and they had three girls. The Falconers lived in Toowoomba, Queensland and ran a service station before taking up dairy farming and then a Ford dealership named Falconer Motors with a cousin. Mrs Falconer passed away in 1995 and Graham, still battling diabetes, moved to a retirement home run by the Toowoomba Returned Services League. He again suffered ill health and passed away in 1997. We thank Graham's daughter Lynette Norton and Lindsay Richards, who served with him, for their help in completing this story.



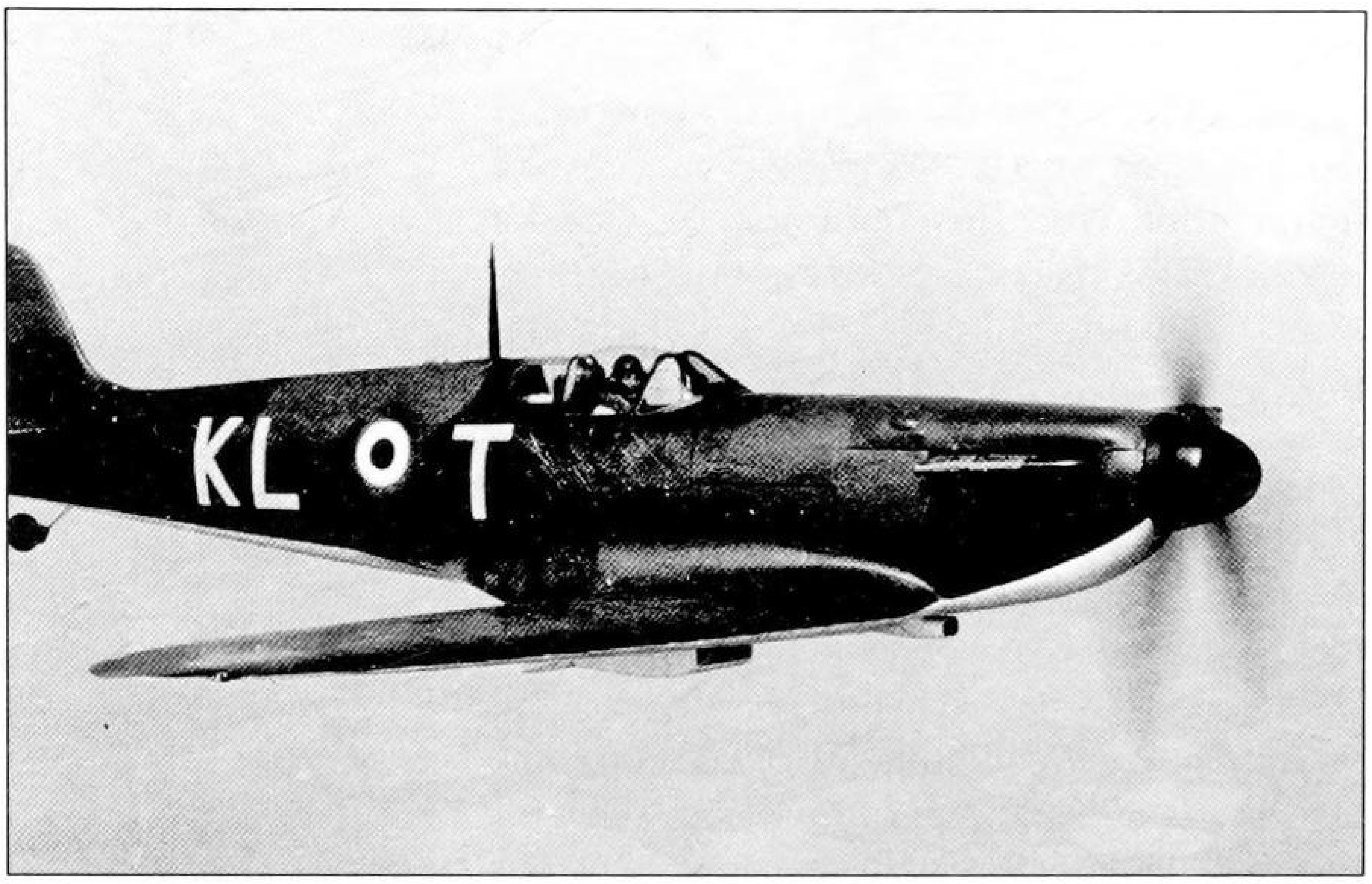
This photo was taken at Berlin-Gatow airfield in the winter 1945/46 where No.451 Squadron was based until January 1946. Fw190 '< + 1', belonged to the *Stab* of an unknown unit. The aircraft is most likely a Fw190F-8 as It's fitted with an F-type wing and ETC bomb racks just visible under the wing. See page page 37 for colour illustrations of this aircraft.

The scrap yard area at Gatow Airfield is now part of a golf course and the building in the background is the club house! (Caption information, Christian Kättlitz. Photo Lindsay Richards)

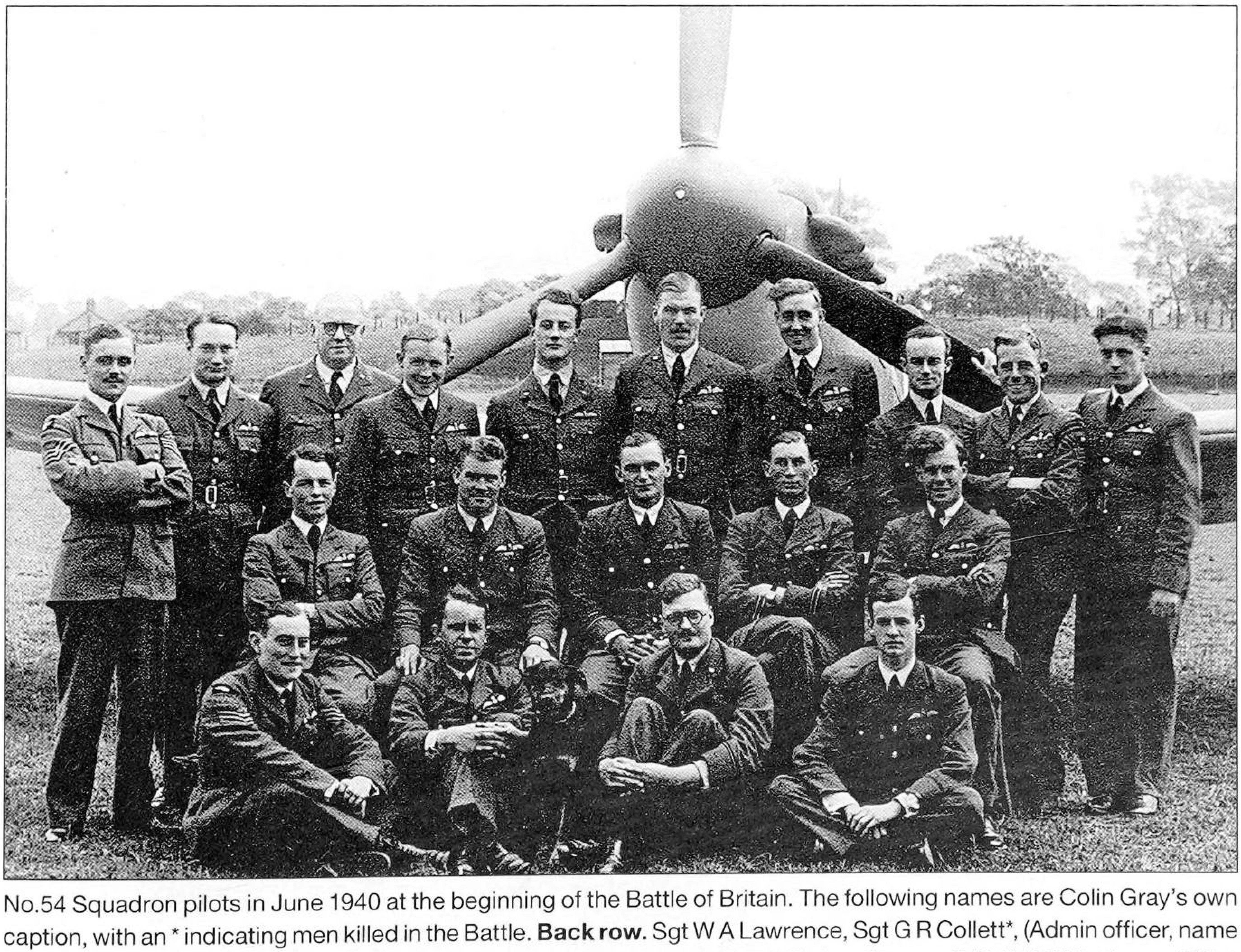
GROUP CAPTAIN C F GRAY, *DSO, DFC, RAF*

In 1990 Colin Gray published his autobiography 'Spitfire Patrol.' This chapter of 'The ANZACs' is based on the final chapter of that book in which Gray discusses the personal attributes required of a good fighter pilot and the on-going controversy regarding claimed 'kills' in World War II.

Colin Falkland Gray and his twin brother Ken both applied for and were accepted for short service commissions in the RAF in 1937. Colin Gray was New Zealand's highest scoring 'Ace' and served in one capacity or another right through World War II. Ken was tragically killed when his Whitley bomber of No.102 Sqn crashed in a storm on 1 May 1940.



Pilot Officer Colin Gray served throughout the Battle of Britain with 54 Squadron. Here in April 1940 he pilots Spitfire Mk I 'KL-T' of No.54 Squadron "somewhere over Essex". The Squadron was based at Hornchurch at the time. No serial numbers were carried at this time as a security measure - an idea soon abandoned. (B Gray)



No.54 Squadron pilots in June 1940 at the beginning of the Battle of Britain. The following names are Colin Gray's own caption, with an * indicating men killed in the Battle. **Back row.** Sgt W A Lawrence, Sgt G R Collett*, (Admin officer, name not recorded), P/O D A P McMullen, P/O P Howes*, P/O A Finnie*, P/O D R Turley-George, P/O H K F Matthews, F/Sgt P H Tew, P/O C F Gray. **Middle row.** P/O (RAF Roll of Honour says F/O) J L Allen*, F/Lt A C Deere, S/L J A Leathart, F/L B H Way*, P/O D G Gribble. **Front row.** Sgt J K Norwell, P/O E J Coleman, P Shallard (Intelligence Officer), P/O W P Hopkins. Not Present P/O A R McM Campbell. (RAF via B Gray)

ATTRIBUTES OF A GOOD FIGHTER PILOT

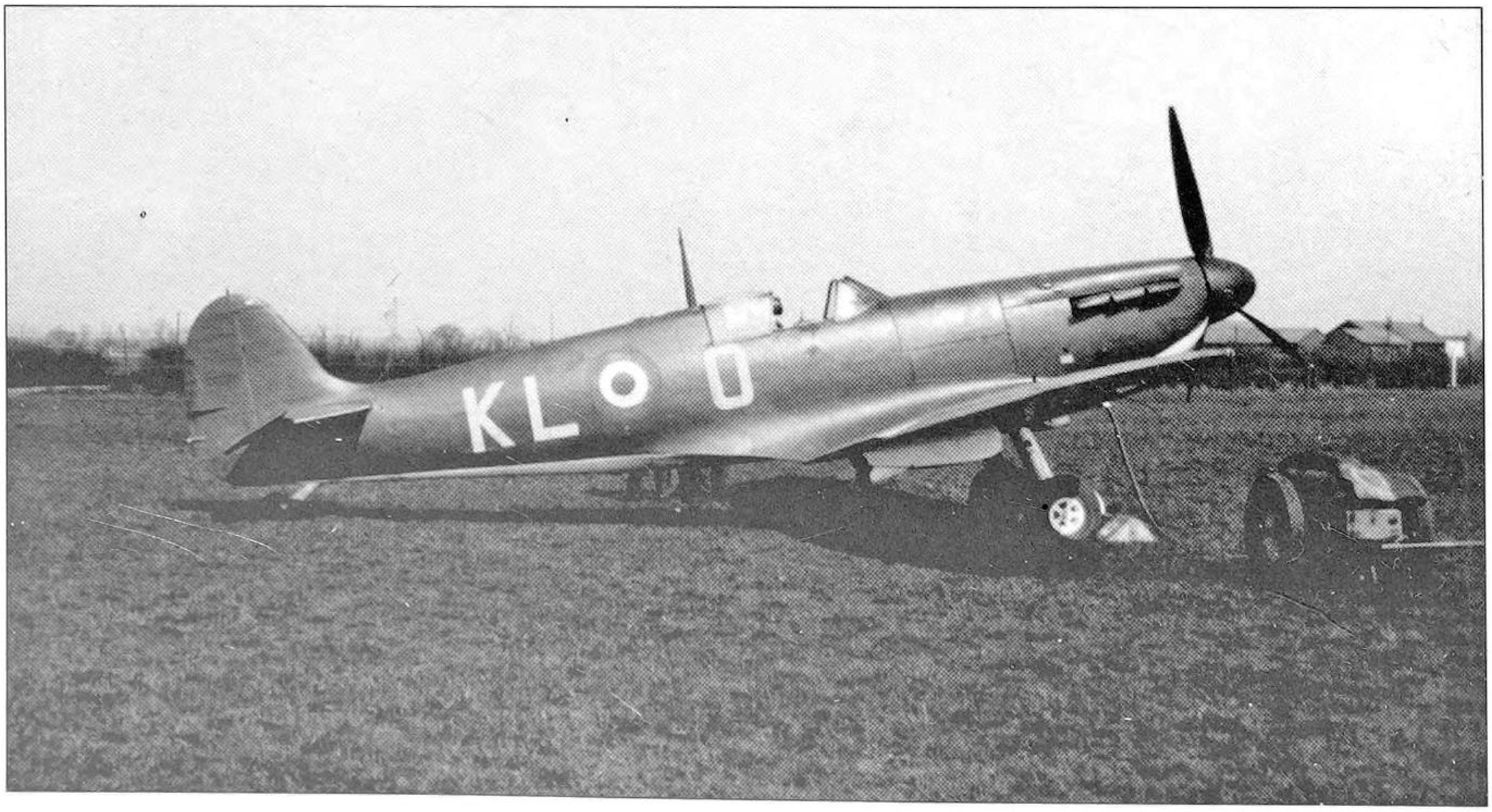
"Looking back over the war years I have often thought about what it took to make a successful fighter pilot. Were they born or could they be made? I think there were two essential qualities where no amount of training would help. The first of these was excellent eyesight, especially long vision, and the second was innate quick reaction – muscular co-ordination. So many opportunities were missed through inability to size up the situation immediately and get in a firing pass before the chance disappeared.

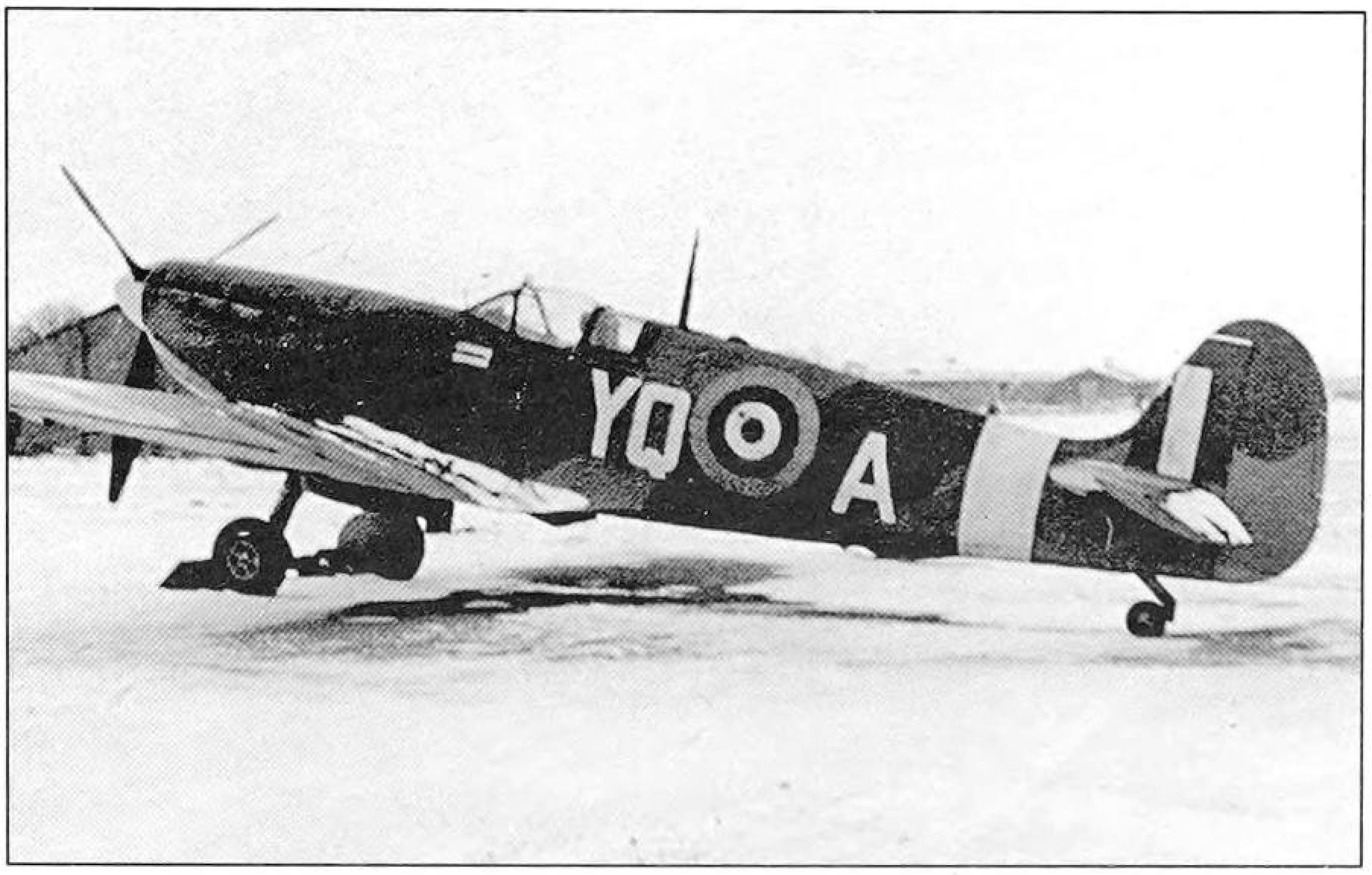
"It certainly helped to be a good marksman, preferably at deflection shooting since this created so many more opportunities. Deflection shooting could be learned, to some extent, but generally speaking it was a skill that only the experts could really master. It was not easy when one considers that a target travelling at 300 miles an hour will move 123 feet or over 40 yards in 0.28 of a second, which is the time taken by a bullet with a muzzle velocity of 2660 feet per second to travel 250 yards to its target. At greater ranges it would take correspondingly longer.

"This is a lot of deflection when you think about it: to aim off by 40 yards at 250 yards range for a 90 degree crossing shot. Fortunately we seldom encountered such large angles, but it gives an idea of the problems involved, and all this pre-supposes that you knew your range, which most did not, and also your target's speed, which could be anything. I am talking here about the case of a .303 bullet. The deflection when using cannon was considerably greater because of its much lower muzzle velocity. Another prob-

Pilot Officer Batchellor poses with Spitfire Mk I 'KL-O' (possibly Q), September/October 1940 at Catterick, North Yorkshire. (B Gray)

Spitfire Mk I 'KL-O' of No.54 Squadron based at Hornchurch, 1940. Picture taken with 'Ortho' film which causes the thin yellow outline on the fuselage roundel to appear dark and almost complete lack of contrast between the upper surface camouflage colours. (B Gray)

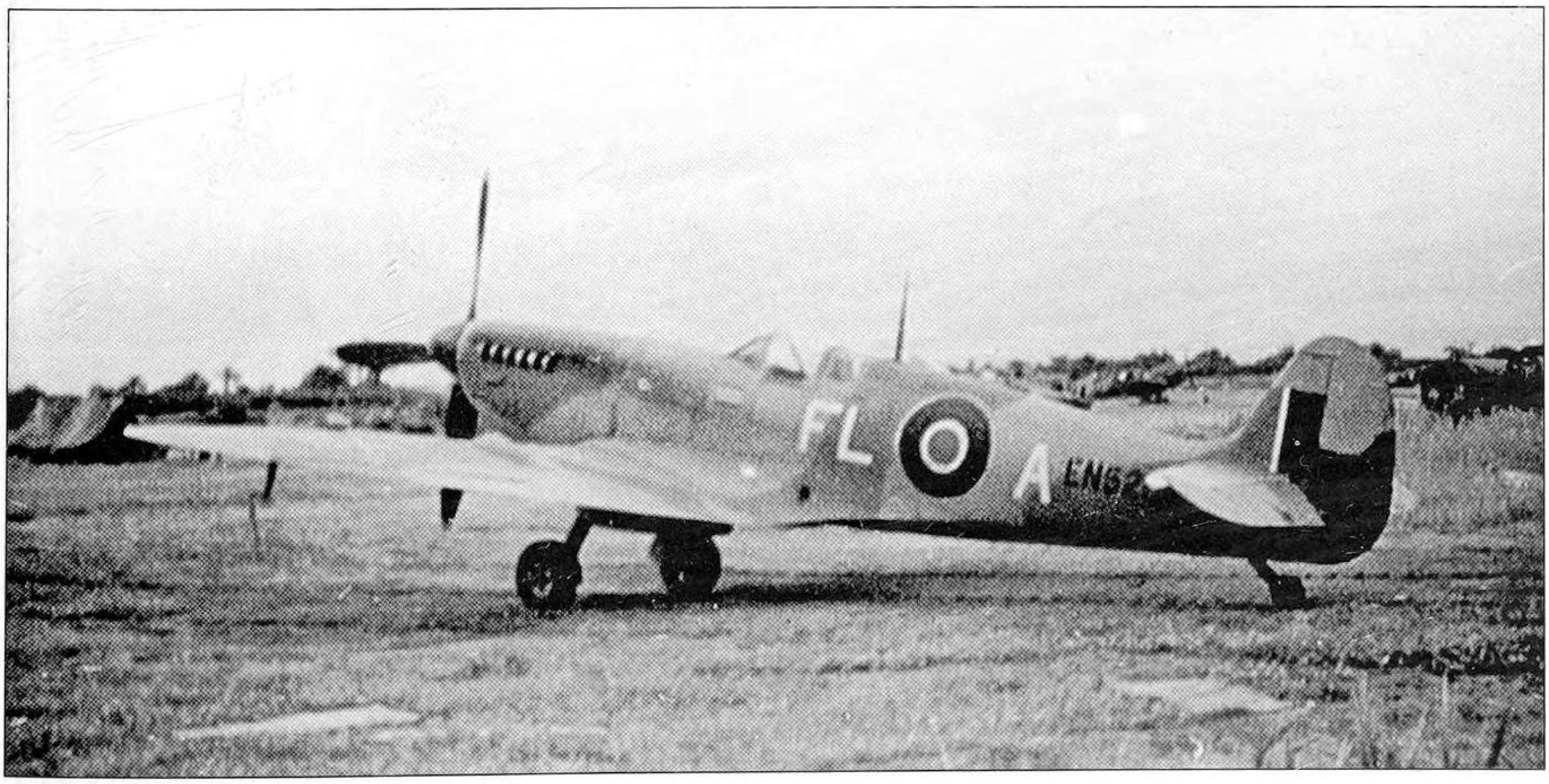




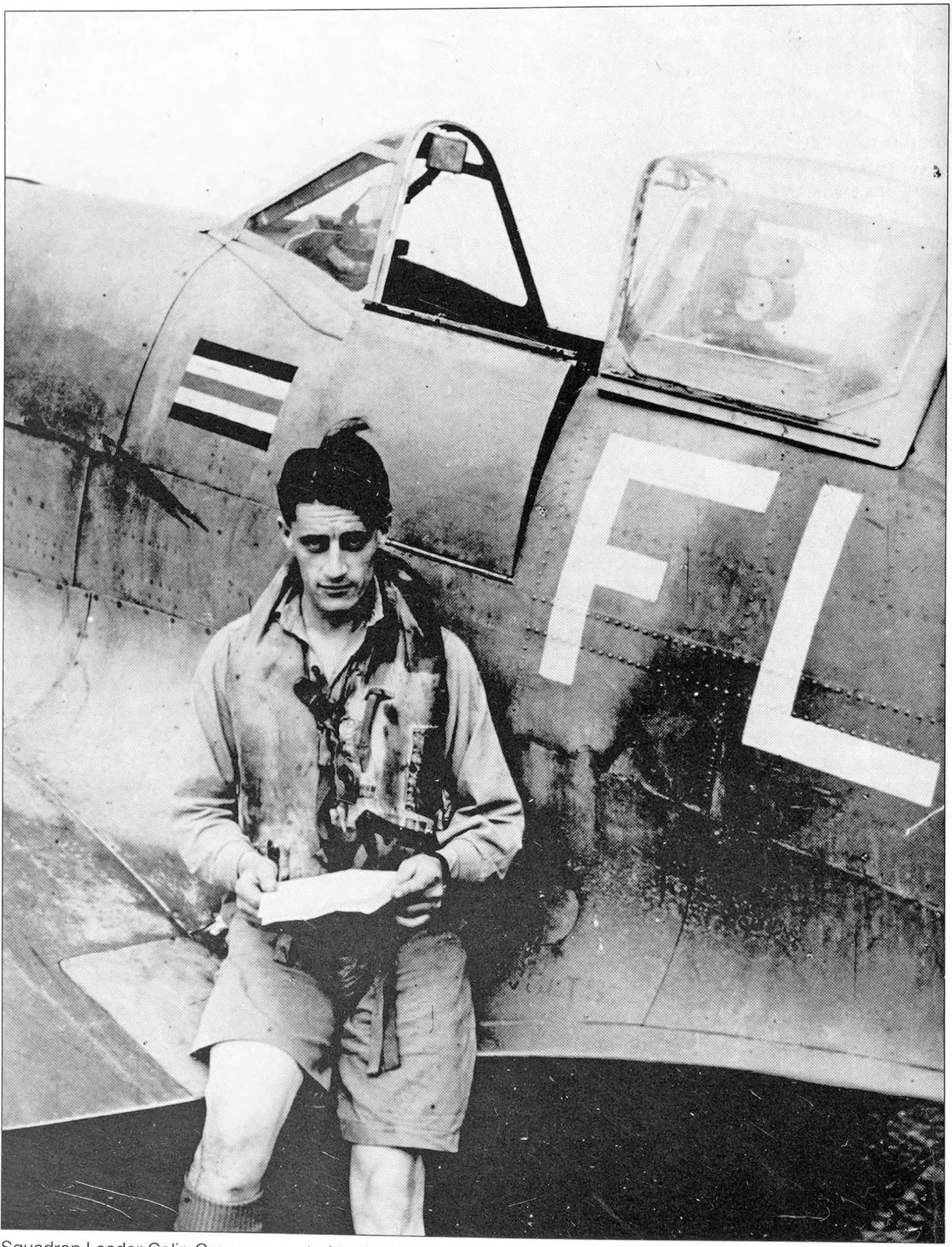
Squadron Leader Gray commanded No.616 Squadron at Wittering for a short period. Here his Spitfire Mk Vb stands in the snow at Kings Cliffe, January 1942. It is finished in the day-fighter colour scheme which came into force on 15 August 1941, of Dark Green and Ocean Grey upper surfaces with Medium Sea Grey lower surfaces. Spinner, code letters and rear fuselage band are Sky. Note also the Squadron Leader's pennant painted beneath the windscreen. (B Gray)

lem, particularly with the Spitfire, was that the reflector sight ring cut across the top of the engine cowling so that as soon as one turned to follow a target it was lost to view beneath the engine. This was less of a problem with a Hurricane, which had a more sloping nose, but could still cause difficulty. One was therefore left shooting at a point in space that could be up to 40 yards ahead of where the target was last seen. This was difficult enough without the associated problems of range, skid, or slip, to name a few.

"Range, for example, was particularly important because our guns were spread out along the wings and had to be 'toed in' so they would meet at 250 yards, which was the selected aiming point. Likewise, the gun sight was five or six feet above the guns, which therefore had to be tilted up to allow for this. All this was known as point harmonization, since everything was supposed to come together at a point 250 yards ahead of the aircraft at the time of firing. Of course, they seldom did because there was too much room for error, especially with range and target speed. Some bright spark came up with the idea that 'spread' harmonization would give the average pilot a better chance of hitting his target by cocking the guns up or down or to one side of the other, thus giving a bigger pattern. However this did not take account of the fact that so-called point harmonization already had in-built scatter, and only ensured that the bullet pattern was so thin it would not hurt a fly. I always insisted that my guns were harmonized on a point for this reason.



Gray was posted to the Middle East and took command of No.81 Squadron on 24 January 1943. At the end of the Tunisian campaign he was flying this early production Spitfire Mk IXc, serial EN520. Colour scheme is the standard Desert Scheme of Dark Earth & Mid Stone upper surfaces and Azure Blue lower surfaces. Spinner is red, codes white. Note also the Squadron Leaders pennant under the windscreen. (A Peart)



Squadron Leader Colin Gray was posted to the Middle East and took command of No.81 Squadron on 24 January, 1943. At the end of the Tunisian campaign he was flying this Spitfire Mk IXc, serial EN520. This machine was upgraded to Mk IX standard by Rolls-Royce and first flew, as a Mk IX, on 11 February 1943. Its camouflage is a field-applied desert scheme of Dark Earth and Mid-Stone upper surfaces with Azure Blue lower surfaces. Spinner is red and codes white. Note the rectangular Mk V-style mirror, repositioned inside the cockpit. (B Gray)

"The only way we had of determining our range was to set the target wingspan on our reflection sight range bars, which were then lined up on the enemy aircraft wings, providing he flew straight and level, which he seldom did. This also pre-supposed that you knew his wingspan, so it was all quite confusing. Also, most piston-engined aircraft , and especially the Spitfire with its big motor and relatively small rudder, were very much affected by engine torque, which could build up to a considerable extent as one increased or decreased speed for any reason – for example, when diving to attack. In a closed cockpit aircraft this was not immediately apparent, and the resultant skid or slip could throw the aim away off target. The only way to correct this was to watch the turn and bank indicators and constantly adjust the rudder trim – just another task for a busy pilot at a critical stage of the attack. It is probably not surprising that in the latter stages of the war, the British produced a gyroscopic gun sight that automatically calculated the right deflection, but this still required accurate flying and correct range setting. I never had the chance to use one.

"The easiest way to shoot an enemy aircraft down was to bore in as close as possible right behind him and let rip, but we very seldom had the chance to do this. I imagine this was the way the night-fighters attacked because deflection shooting at night would not be on. In fact any sort of shooting at night without radar was a complete waste of time as far as I could see. I know there were some pilots of single-seaters who claimed success at night, but I would have my doubts. I spent quite a lot of time at night looking for enemy aircraft, including a spell in a Hurricane night-fighter squadron, but never saw an enemy aircraft, even on bright moonlit nights with their bombs dropping all around.

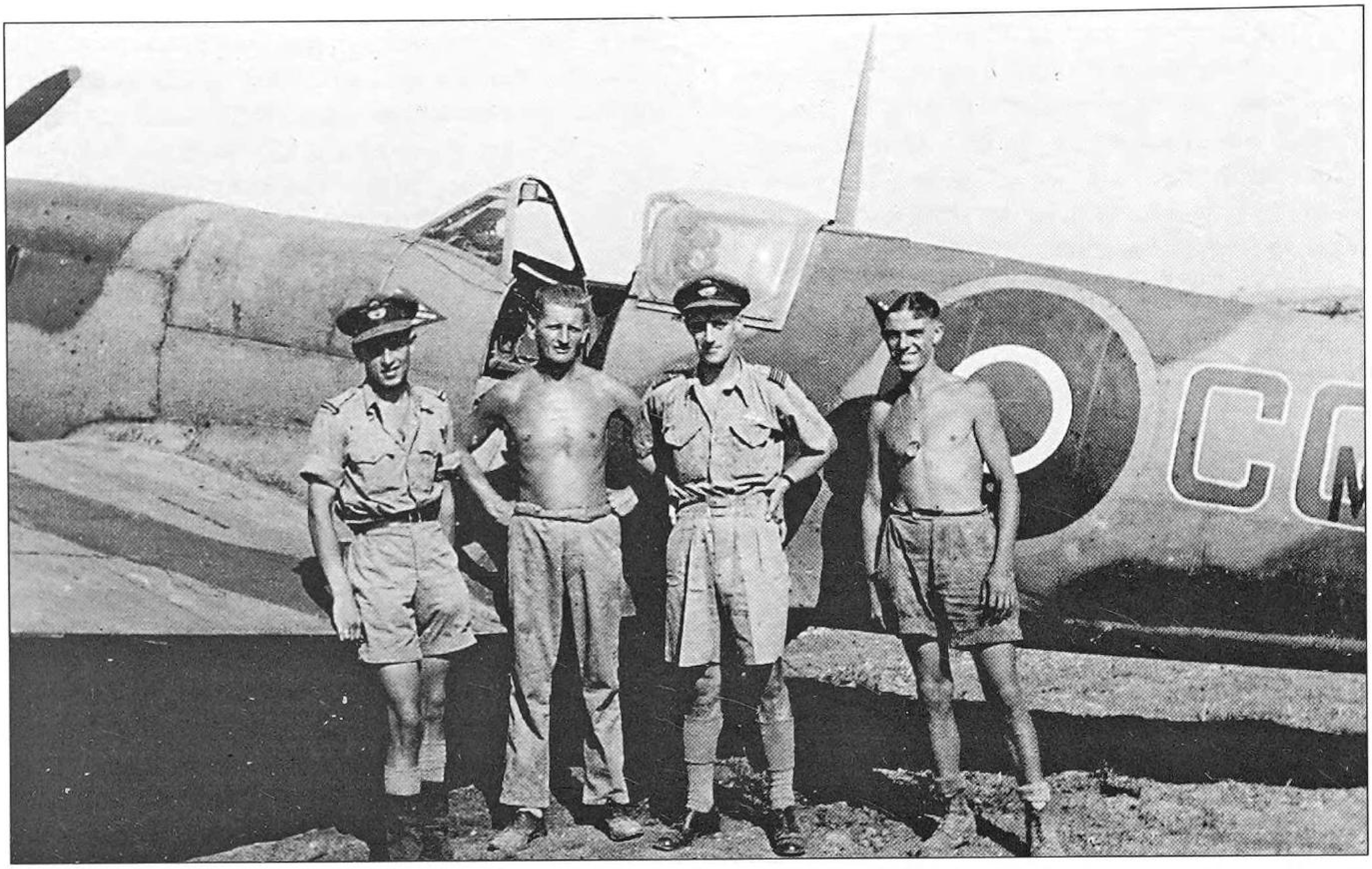
"Apart from all these gunnery problems the most critical factor in successful combat was clearly a question of opportunity. If you were not lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time..."

AXIS PILOT'S CLAIMS

"In this respect I think the Germans had far more opportunities than we did, since for a large part of the time they were up against greater numbers, especially in Russia, and had no difficulty finding targets. However, I also think their higher command's philosophy was quite different as regards resting their pilots. The Allies tended to spell pilots after a tour of operations.

N
S
NEIN PISSEN OHT DEN POSTEN

Pilots and ground crew, No.81 Squadron, Tunisia 1943. From the left, standing, Warrant Officer 'Chiefy' Saxton (ground crew), Pilot Officer W (Bill) Fell, Sergeant Pilot Major, Sergeant Pilot Campbell (killed at 'Broadway' Burma), Flight Sergeant Burton (ground crew), Sergeant Pilot Graham Hulse and Flying Officer Montgomerie (A New Zealander who later died from wounds received over Normandy). Front row. Sergeant Pilot Donald Rathwell (Canada), Squadron Leader Gray, Flight Lieutenant Goby. (A Peart)



Wing Commander Colin Gray, third from the left, with Warrant Officer 'Chiefy' Saxton, second from left with another pilot and ground crew member. The photo was taken in front of Gray's Spitfire Mk IXc, serial MA408, Lentini, Sicily, July 1943. (B Gray)

The Germans seemed to keep their successful pilots on operations for as long as possible and give them just a few days off for a rest when they were completely exhausted.

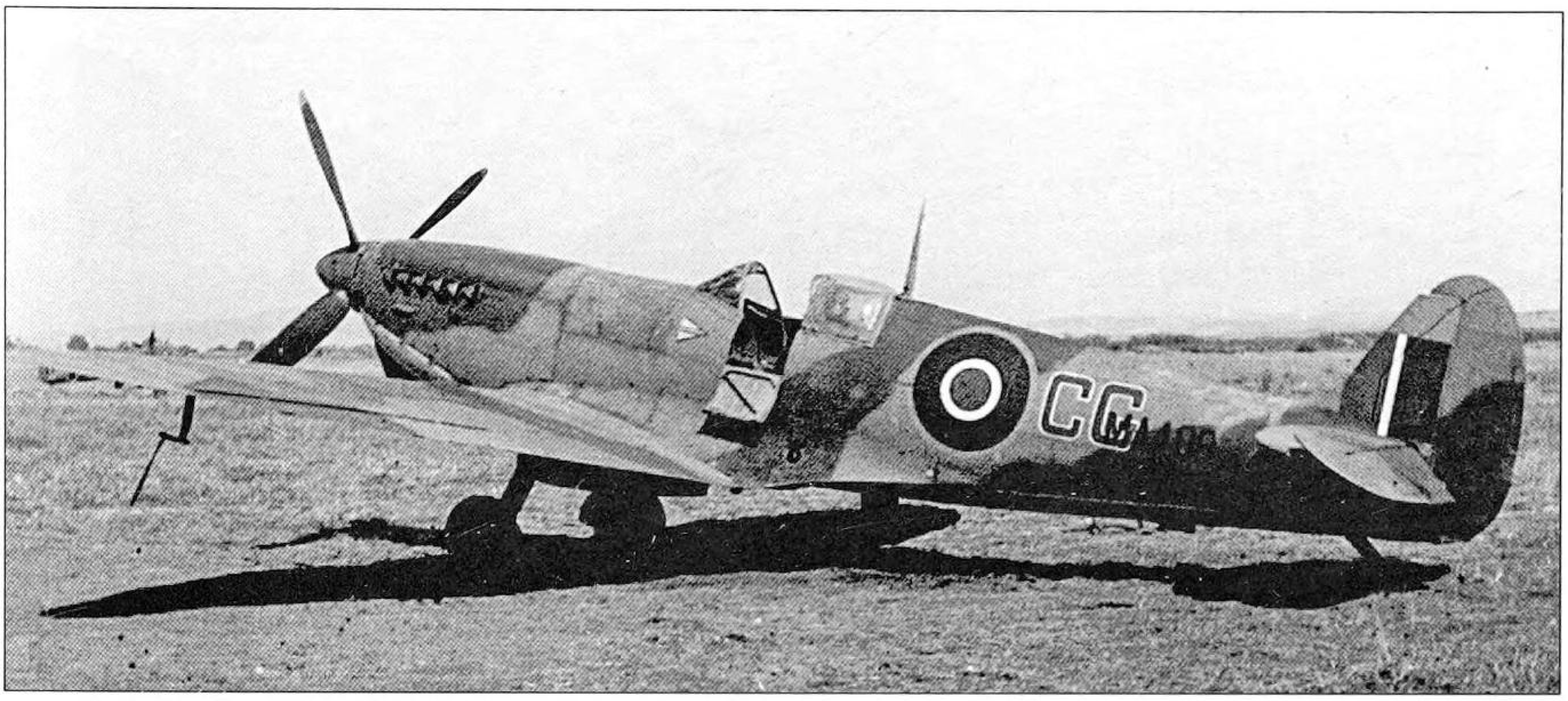
"Even so, I find it hard to accept some of the Germans' totals of aircraft destroyed, which appear quite astronomical in comparison with ours. Christopher Shores in his book Air Aces lists the 'aces' of various countries. He remarks that the Second World War in Russia saw the greatest air battles and the highest personal scores of all time, with two Germans claiming over 300 aircraft each.

"Overall, there were thirty five Germans with scores of 150 or more. The top Japanese pilot, Lieutenant Tetsuko Iwamoto, claimed ninety-four, and four other Japanese had scores of over fifty. By contrast, the top Allied pilot was a Russian, Major Ivan Kodejub, who claimed sixty-two, followed by the top American, Major Richard Bong, with a score of forty, and the top British pilot was Johnnie Johnson, with thirty-four, if one excepts Pattle whose score was never authenticated as the records were lost after he was killed in Greece.

"One German pilot, Hauptman Marseille, is credited with shooting down 158 Allied aircraft, mostly in North Africa. He claimed no less than six South African Tomahawks on one sortie over the desert on 3 June 1942, and an astronomical seventeen in three sorties on 1 September. All this was in three years, as he was killed on 30 September 1942. I do not know how he did it. The Messerschmitt 109 must have carried a lot more ammunition than we did, as our fourteen seconds of fire (nine seconds with cannons) was seldom enough for us to shoot down more than two enemy aircraft in one combat, and we seldom achieved that.

"I flew my first operational sortie in December 1940, not long after war was declared, and from then on until VE day, 7 May 1945, I flew operationally whenever I got the chance, including rest periods. Altogether, I flew a total of about 650 operational hours, but was able to open fire on the enemy only about sixty times, and claimed twenty-seven and a half enemy aircraft destroyed, and a lesser number probably destroyed or damaged, which put me ninth on the British Commonwealth list compiled by Christopher Shores.

"I think it is very important to understand that any list of enemy aircraft scores for the Second World War – or any war I suppose – is merely a list of what the pilots themselves claimed to have shot down. Certainly as far as the RAF is concerned there was never any attempt to produce an 'official' list, and indeed it would be impossible to do so with any accuracy. Intelligence officers did vet claims as far as they were able, although some were rather more optimistic than others. However, as far as I was concerned, at least six of my so-called

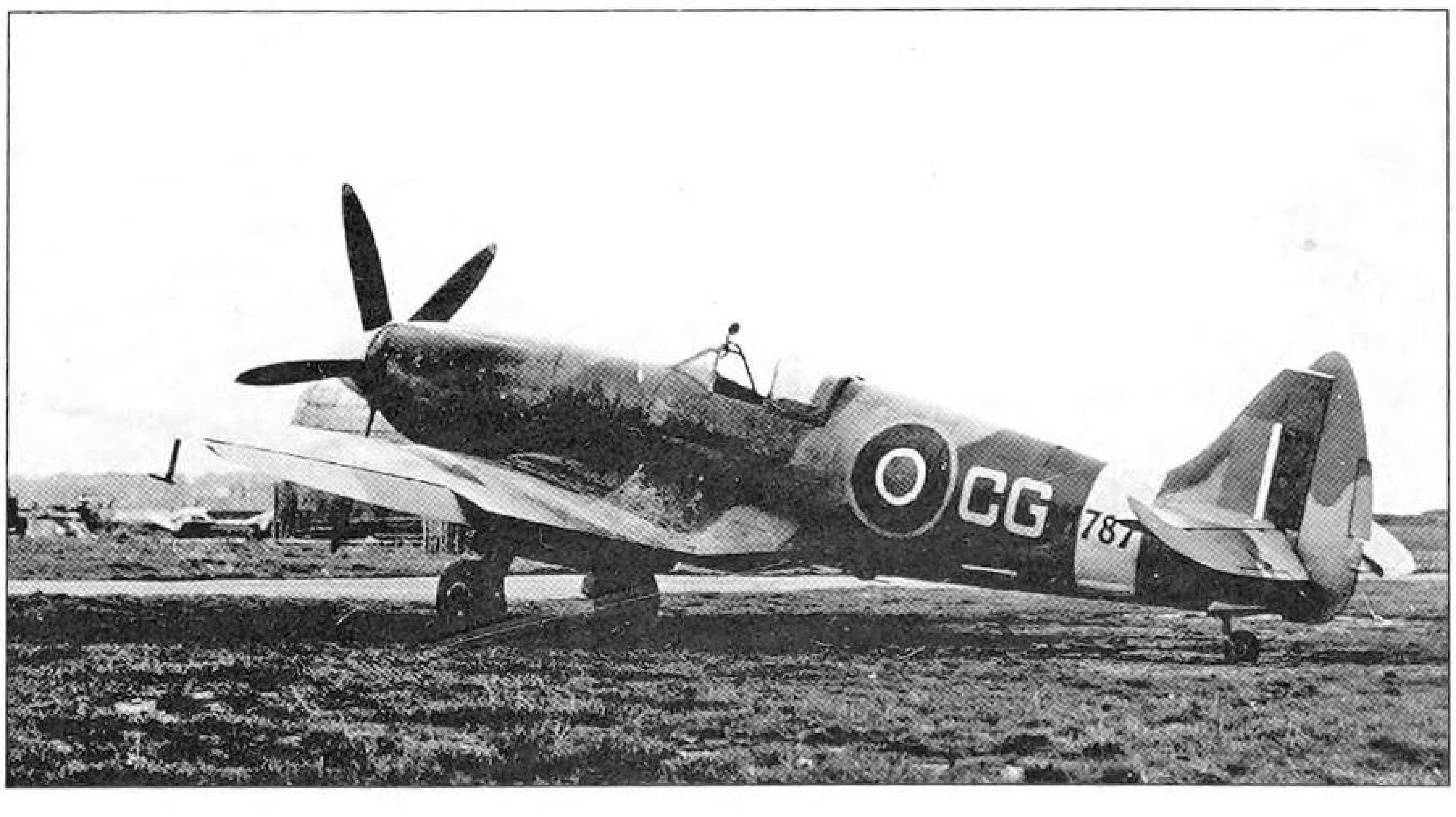


MA408 was one of the last of the early series Spitfire Mk IXs and left the factory with the then standard short carburettor intake, as did all other Mk IXs in the eighth production batch. This particular airframe had a Merlin 63 engine, fuel cooler with intake in port wing root, no I.D. lamp behind the antenna mast and Mk I style elevators as distinguishing features. (B Gray)

victims were shot down into the sea, either the Channel or the Mediterranean, for example. I know this because I saw the splashes, but no one else would necessarily know. Even if these combats were seen by others, which did not always happen, they still had no proof. Other enemy aircraft were either shot down and crashed, or baled out over enemy territory, and again they were not necessarily seen by others. True, there were certainly some who crashed or baled out over our own territory, for example during the Battle of Britain, but one seldom received any confirmation because everyone was far too busy. So who knows?

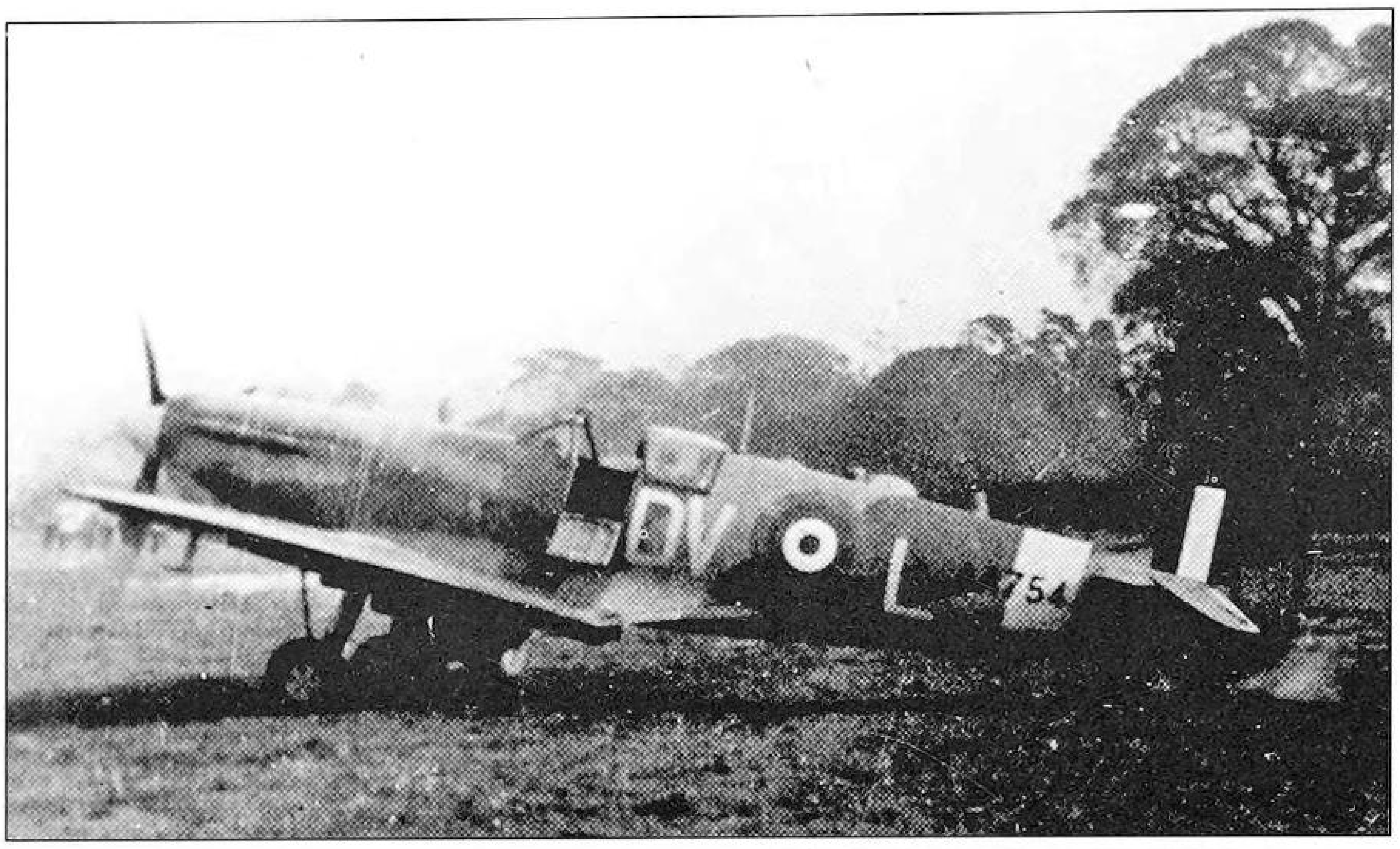
"Post-war research has clearly shown that there was a considerable element of overclaiming by both sides, although this was not necessarily universal. Generally speaking the more experienced the pilot, the more reliable were his claims. I am sure there were some chronic overclaimers, about whom we all had our suspicions, but conversely there were others whose claims I considered to be accurate. Also there was no doubt that the bigger the numbers involved, the greater the possibility of errors because of double claiming. Christopher Shores, who has done a considerable amount of research into this subject, agrees that the larger the numbers involved the greater the degree of overclaiming, but considers that in general two actually shot down for three claimed was a good average. He is probably right.

"Christopher Shores credits me with a score of 27.7 enemy aircraft, although I have always listed it as twenty-seven and a half. The reason for this is that he has decimalised everything and has included a Messerschmitt 110 which five of us shot down during the Battle of Britain, which accounts for point two. I've never thought it worth mentioning. As a matter of interest, some very well known pilots included shared aircraft in their totals as whole victories, but this does not seem quite right. As I have previously said, these so called scores were merely claims anyway so I don't suppose it matters much."



Wing Commander Gray's personal Spitfire F.XIV (RM787) at Lympne September/October 1944. (B Gray)

FLIGHT LIEUTENANT E S HALL, RAAF



The Spitfire Mk VB, 'DV-L', (AA754) flown by Flight Lieutenant Hall from 16 December 1941. Although not visible because of the poor quality of the photo, this aircraft was named 'DML Overdale' after his fiancee (later wife) Dorothy Margaret Leahy and his property Overdale. AA754 had the small De Havilland spinner carried on many Mk VBs, without the wide cuffs on the prop blades and the later internal type armour in the windscreen. (S Mackenzie)

Edward Smith 'Sammy' Hall, was a grazier (cattle farmer) prior to joining the RAAF. He enlisted in November 1940 and trained at 11 SFTS at Yorktown, Saskatchewan, Canada and then No.61 OTU, Heston, England.

Hall's first operational posting was to No.129 'Mysore' Squadron RAF, Tangmere, in October 1941. He held the rank of Pilot Officer and had completed 175 flying hours. This relatively low level of flying experience for a new front-line pilot would have been relatively common at the time.

His first 'Op' was on 29 October 1941 and initially he flew a variety of different Spitfires, not receiving his own personal aircraft, Spitfire VB, 'DV-L', AA754, until 16 December. He named this aircraft 'DML Overdale' after his fiancee (later wife) Dorothy Margaret Leahy and his property 'Overdale'.

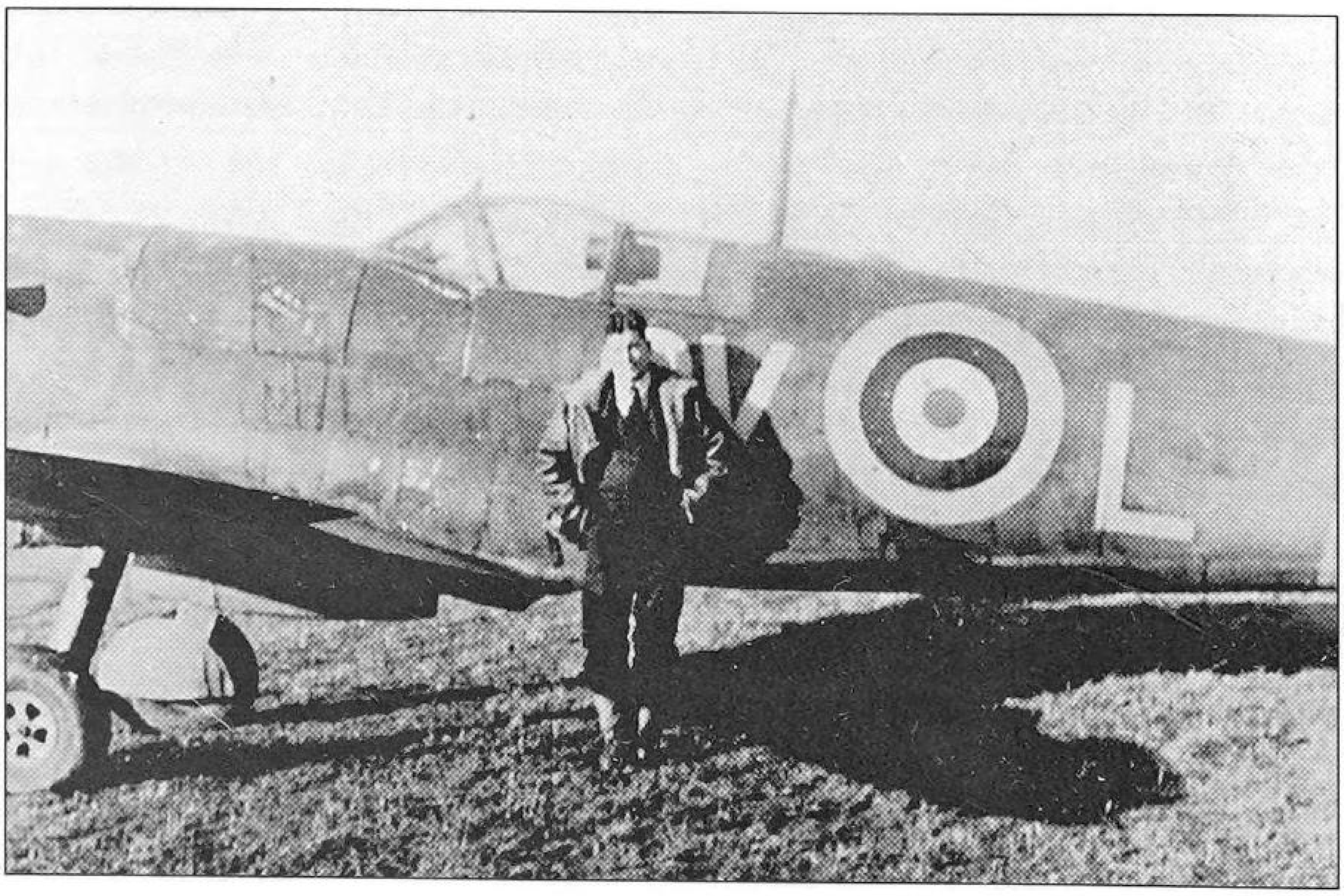
He flew AA754 until 4 April 1942 when he had to crash-land at Ramsgate with a partially seized engine caused by loss of glycol due to enemy action. That day the Squadron was scrambled to protect air-sea rescue motor boats off the French coast near Dunkirk. Hall was flying as the No.2 to the Australian Ace Pilot Officer Hugo Armstrong when the Squadron was attacked by Fw 190s. Armstrong and Hall were separated from the rest of No.129 Squadron and over the town of Dunkirk were again attacked, this time by four Fw 190s. Hall was hit several times holing his cooling system. In order to prevent his engine seizing he was forced to repeatedly switch off and glide in the direction of England, before restarting and climbing to regain some altitude. All the while Armstrong was desperately defending him, shooting down one Fw 190 and claiming another damaged, as related by Hall. ('Aces High' by Christopher Shaw, Grub Street, England, only credits Armstrong with one damaged).

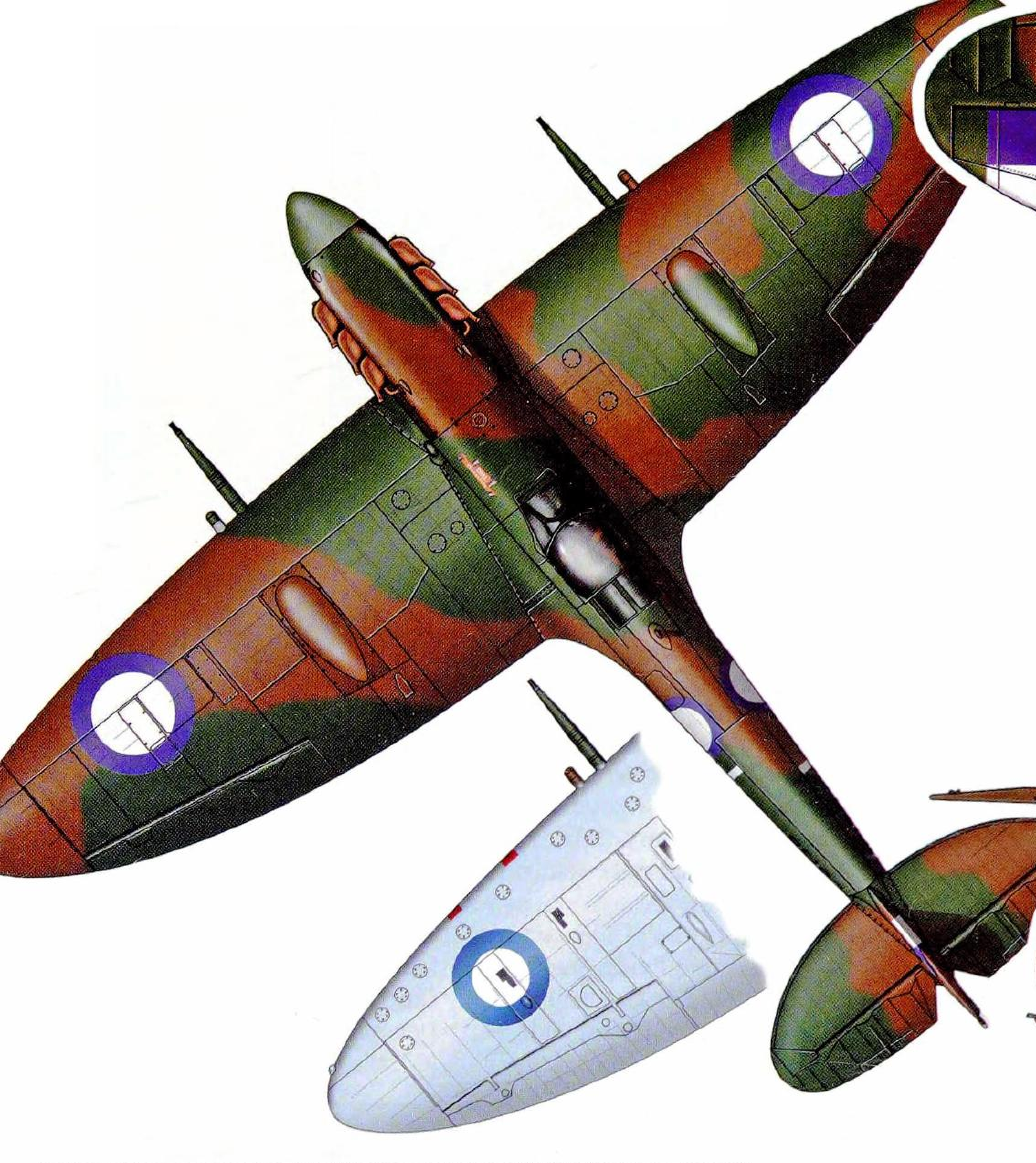
With AA754 damaged, Hall received a replacement Spitfire also coded 'DV-L' which he named 'DML Overdale'. Edward Hall first flew this machine into action on 10 April 1942 and used it regularly until he was made leader of 'B' Flight on 30 July 1942. Thereafter he generally flew a Spitfire Mk VB coded 'DV-V'.

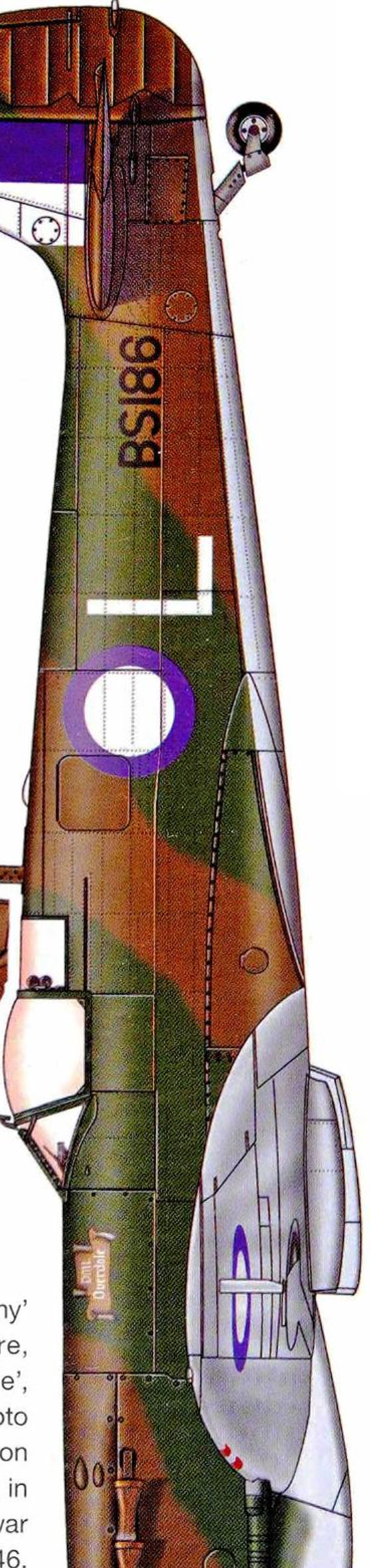
Hall claimed a Fw 190 destroyed in combat on 23 July but this victory is not confirmed in 129 Squadron's Operational Record Book. He also claimed a Heinkel He 115 on 18 August 1942, although 129 Squadron's records note that this 'kill' was shared amongst the members of his flight as the enemy aircraft was attacked by a number of pilots.

Flight Lieutenant Hall's last operation with No.129 Squadron

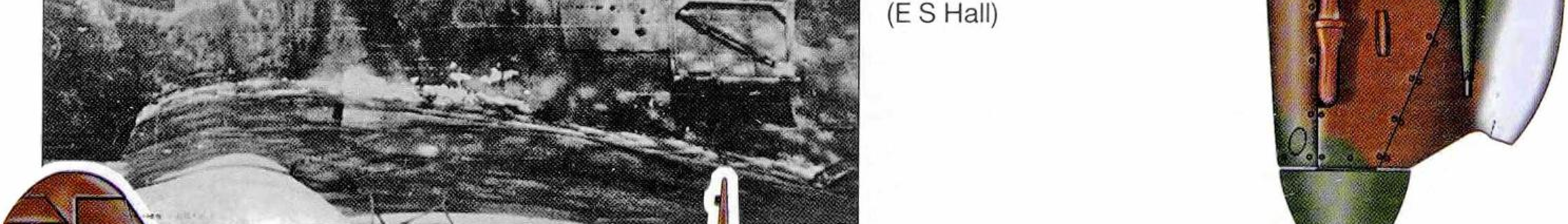
Edward Hall with the replacement aircraft mentioned in the text, also coded 'DV-L' and named 'DML Overdale' forward of the windscreen on the port side; first flown by Hall on 10 April 1942. (E S Hall)






BS186
L
D.M.L Overdale

Flight Lieutenant 'Sammy' Hall sits on his Spitfire, BS186 'D.M.L Overdale', about July 1943. This photo shows BS186 with squadron code letters 'QY' added in sky blue. It survived the war and was written off in 1946. (E S Hall)



involved covering the Dieppe landings on 19 August 1942, during which the Squadron was heavily engaged. Thereafter No.129 Squadron was withdrawn from the front line and moved to Skeabrae for a rest period. In Hall's case, he was posted to the Central Gunnery School for a course on 22 August.

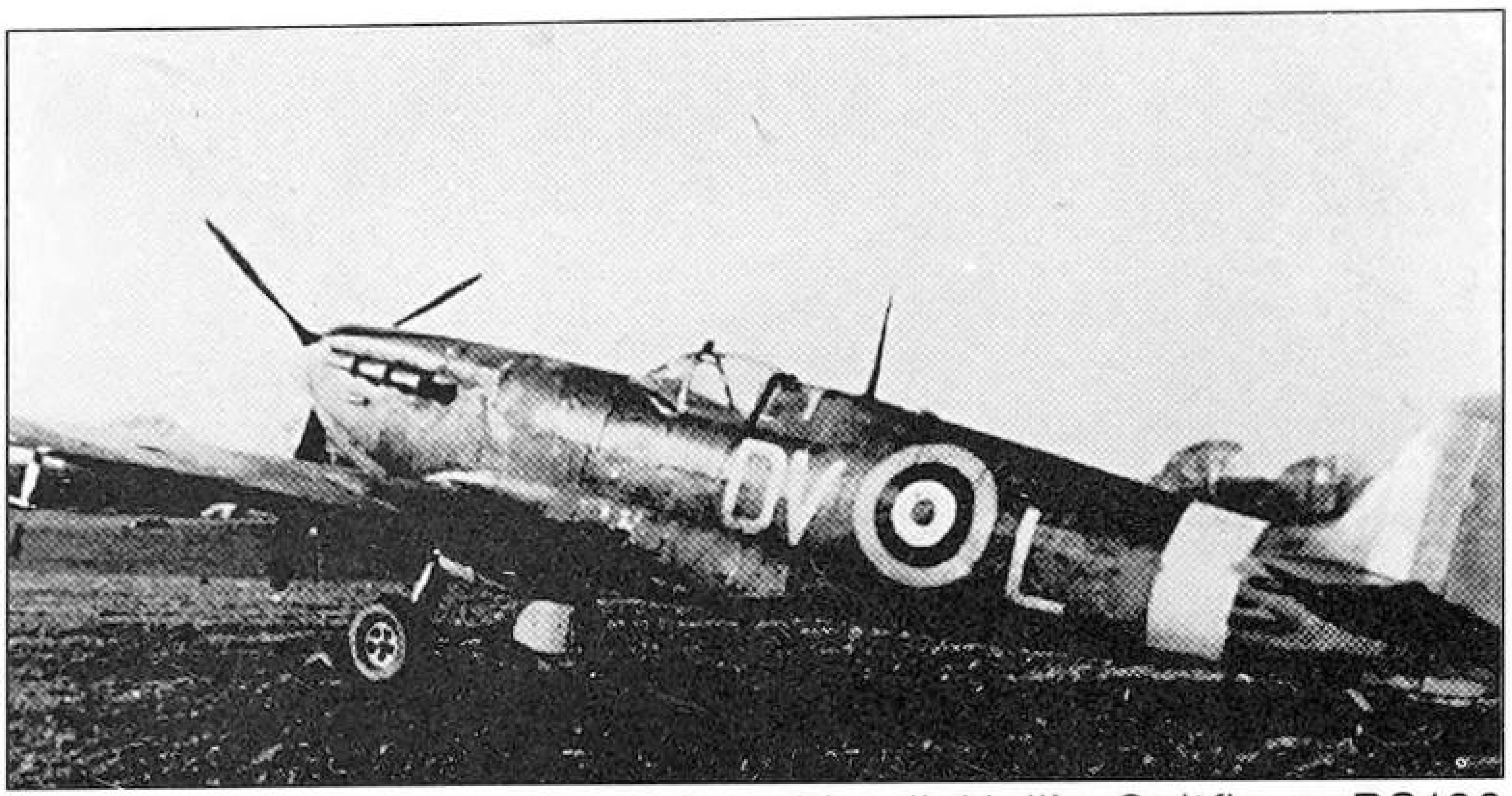
Home to Australia

As a combat experienced Spitfire pilot, Hall was posted home to Australia in late 1942. As such, he was an ideal Officer for the newly formed No.1 Fighter Wing RAAF which was training to take over the defence of the North West Australia theatre (NWA). On arrival he was demoted to the substantive rank of Pilot Officer but was soon posted to No.452 Squadron as a Flight Lieutenant in charge of 'A' Flight on 5 January 1943. He held this position until he was posted to No.2 OTU on 25 July.

While with No.452 Squadron, Hall seems to have flown the same personal aircraft for the entire period. This was Spitfire Mk Vc (Trop), 'QY-L', BS186 'DML Overdale'. Initially No.452 Squadron only carried an individual code letter on their machines (see photo top of page 35) until the introduction of RAF style three letter codes in January 1943.

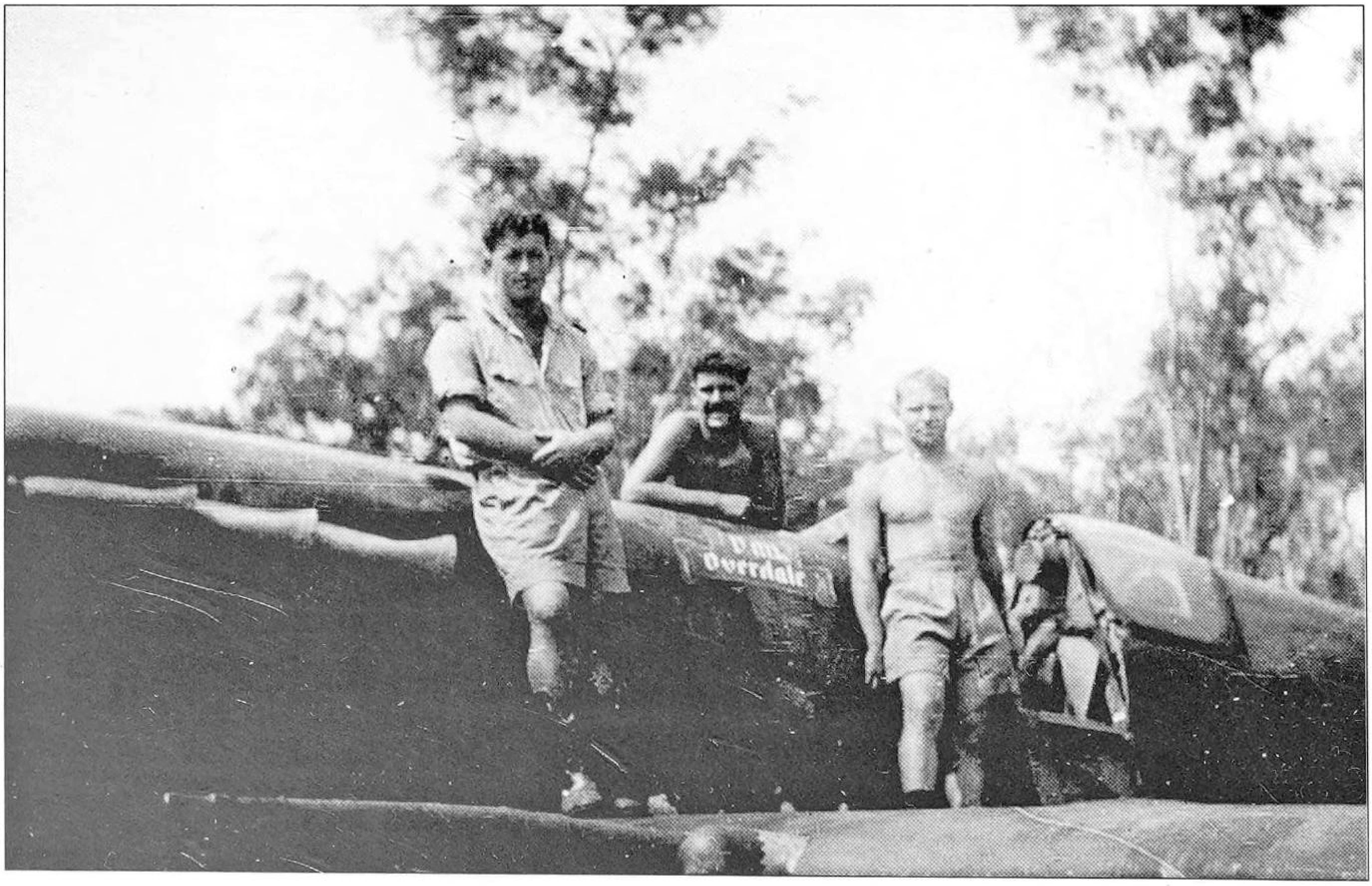
During his operational tour in Darwin, Hall claimed three confirmed victories against Japanese 'Zeroes'.

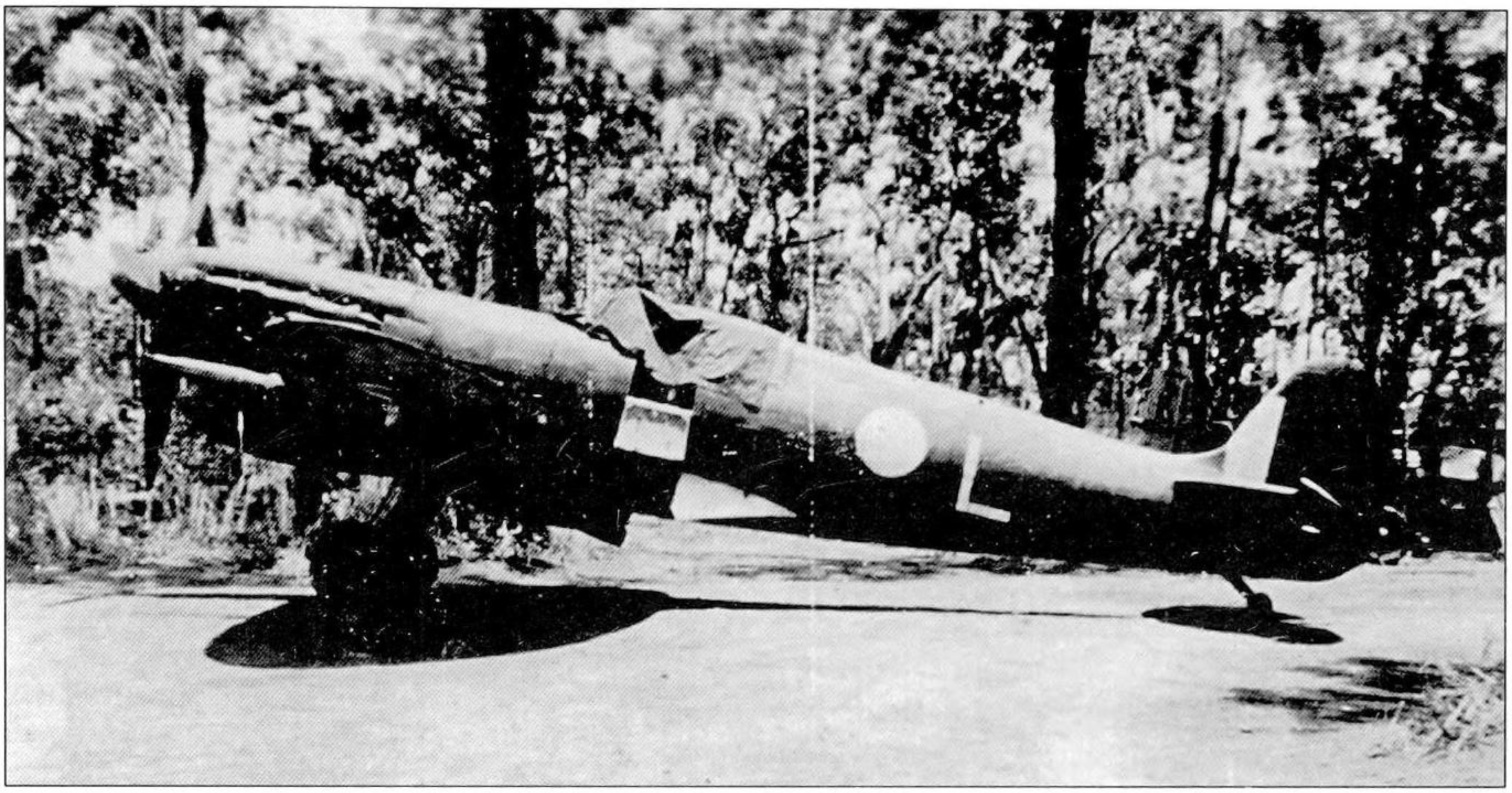
On 15 March 1943 five Spitfires, led by 452 Squadron's CO, Squadron Leader A. Thorold-Smith, were returning from night flying practice at Darwin to their base at Strauss. Hall and Pilot Officer Goldsmith (the Australian ace from Malta) were members of the flight. By coincidence, the Japanese were mounting their first big raid on Darwin during



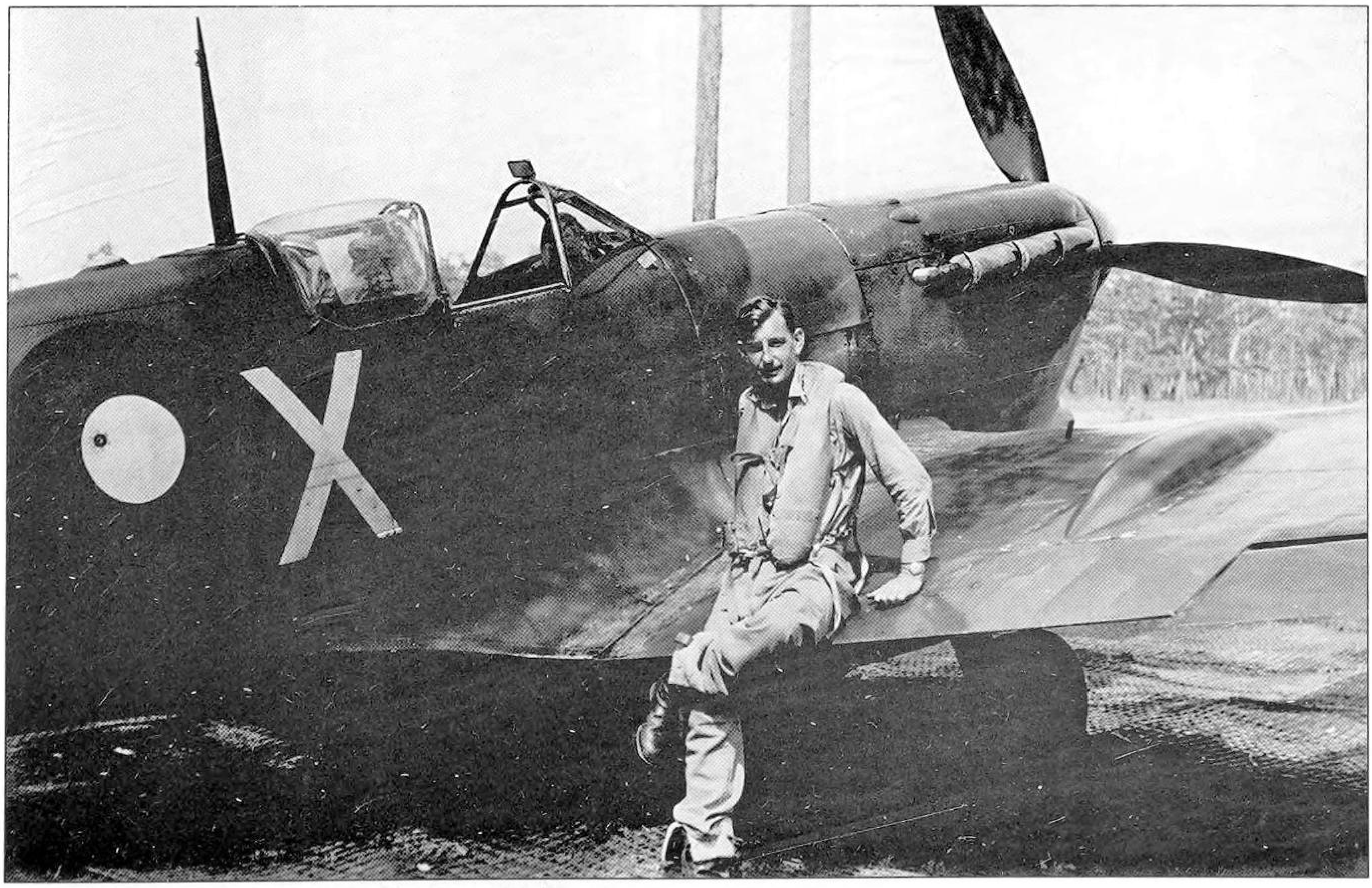
As with all Hall's Spitfires, BS186 carried the name 'D.M.L Overdale' in White forward of the windscreen. This later photo shows BS186 with the Squadron codes 'QY' added in either the specified sky blue or white. It survived the war and was written off in 1946. (E S Hall)

From the left, F/Lt Hall, Flight Mechanic Crombie and LAC Vic Callaghan who was a rigger for Flt/Lt Hall and P/O Goldsmith's Spitfires. (G Callaghan)





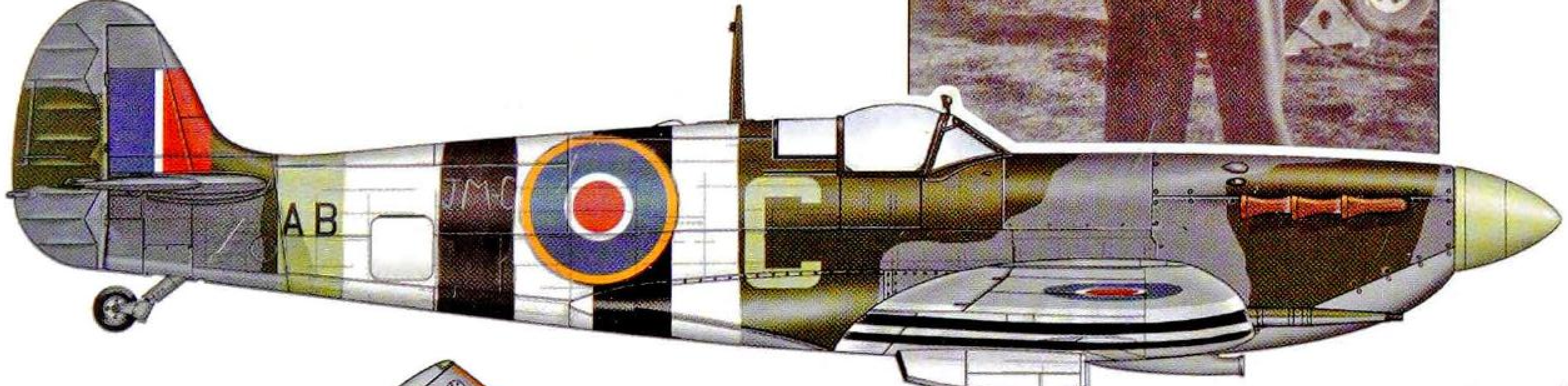
While stationed in the Darwin area Hall flew the above Spitfire Mk Vc (Trop), 'L', serial BS186, named 'DML Overdale'. Note the tropical filter, small De Havilland spinner, propeller without the wide cuffs on its blades and a cover over the canopy with the cockpit door open, to reduce cockpit heat. BS186 has the later internal armour in the windscreen, as did all the Mk Vcs sent to Australia. Camouflage colours are most likely to be RAAF Earth Brown (FS 20099) and Foliage green (FS 24092) upper surfaces with Sky Blue (FS 25550) under surfaces and a black spinner. This machine does not appear to carry the white wing leading edge stripes specified for Spitfires based in Darwin in 1943. Waxing and polishing of combat aircraft was common at the time. (E S Hall)

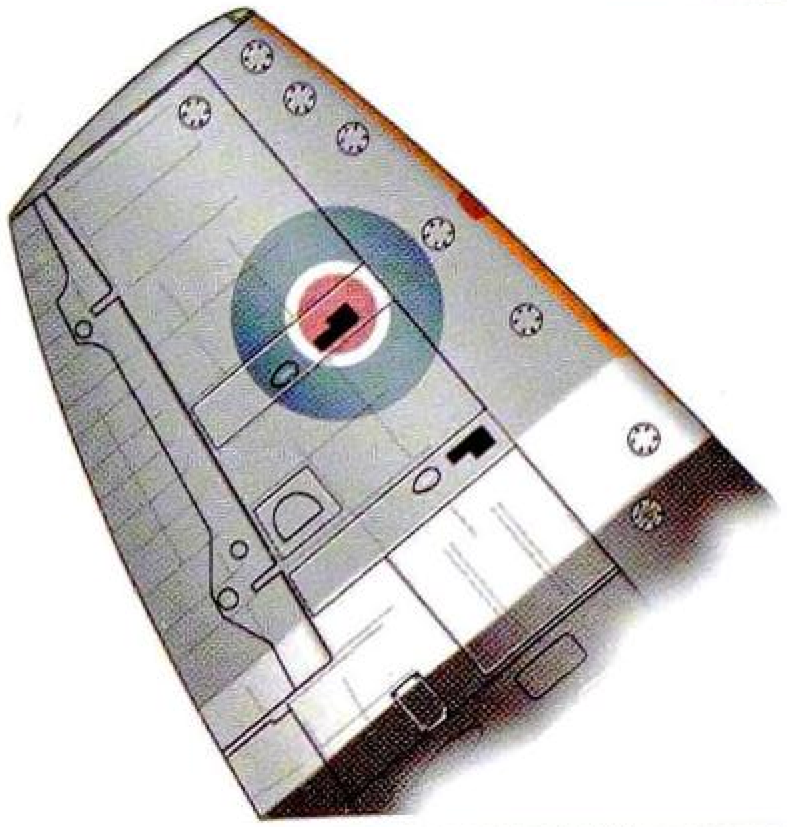


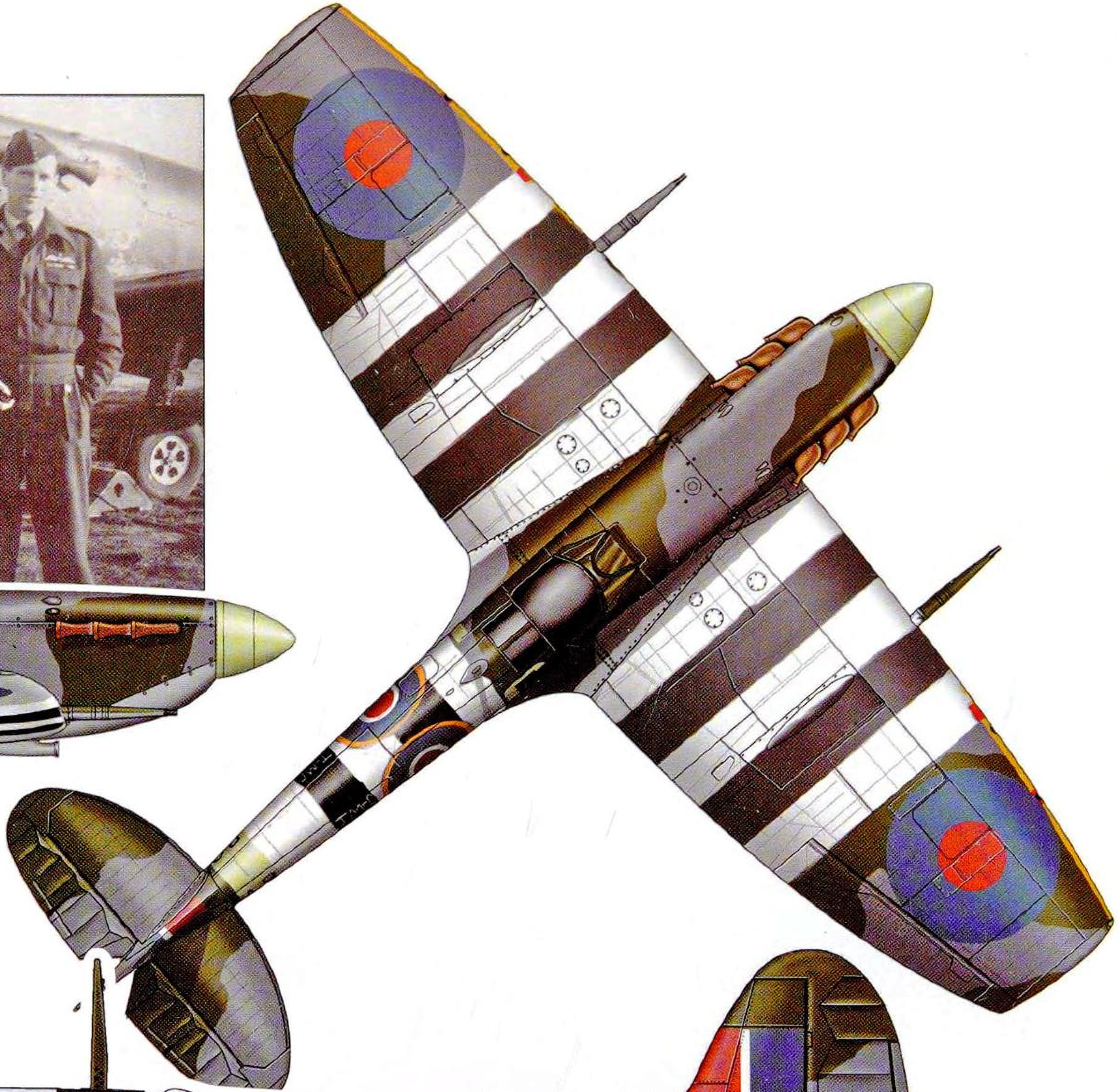
An unidentified pilot with 452 Squadron's 'A' Flight at Strauss, Darwin area, 1943. The Spitfire Mk.Vc (Trop) is coded 'QY-X', serial unknown. (S Mackenzie)

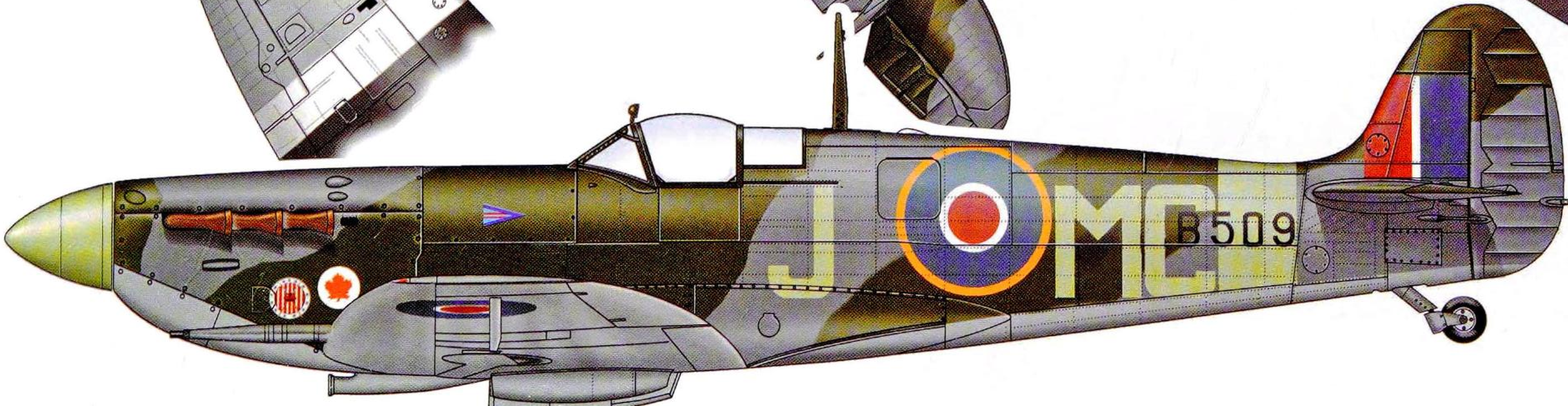
Spitfire LF.Vc AB509, flown by Wing Commander John Milne Checketts, Wing Commander (Flying), 142 Wing, June 1944. The port side illustration shows AB509 before 'Invasion' stripes were applied, while the other views show the aircraft as it appeared on D-Day. A port side view with 'Invasion' stripes appears on the back cover. Note, the late style 'c' wing cannon bulges, the outer cannon stubs have been removed and the fitting of tailplanes with enlarged horn balance area.

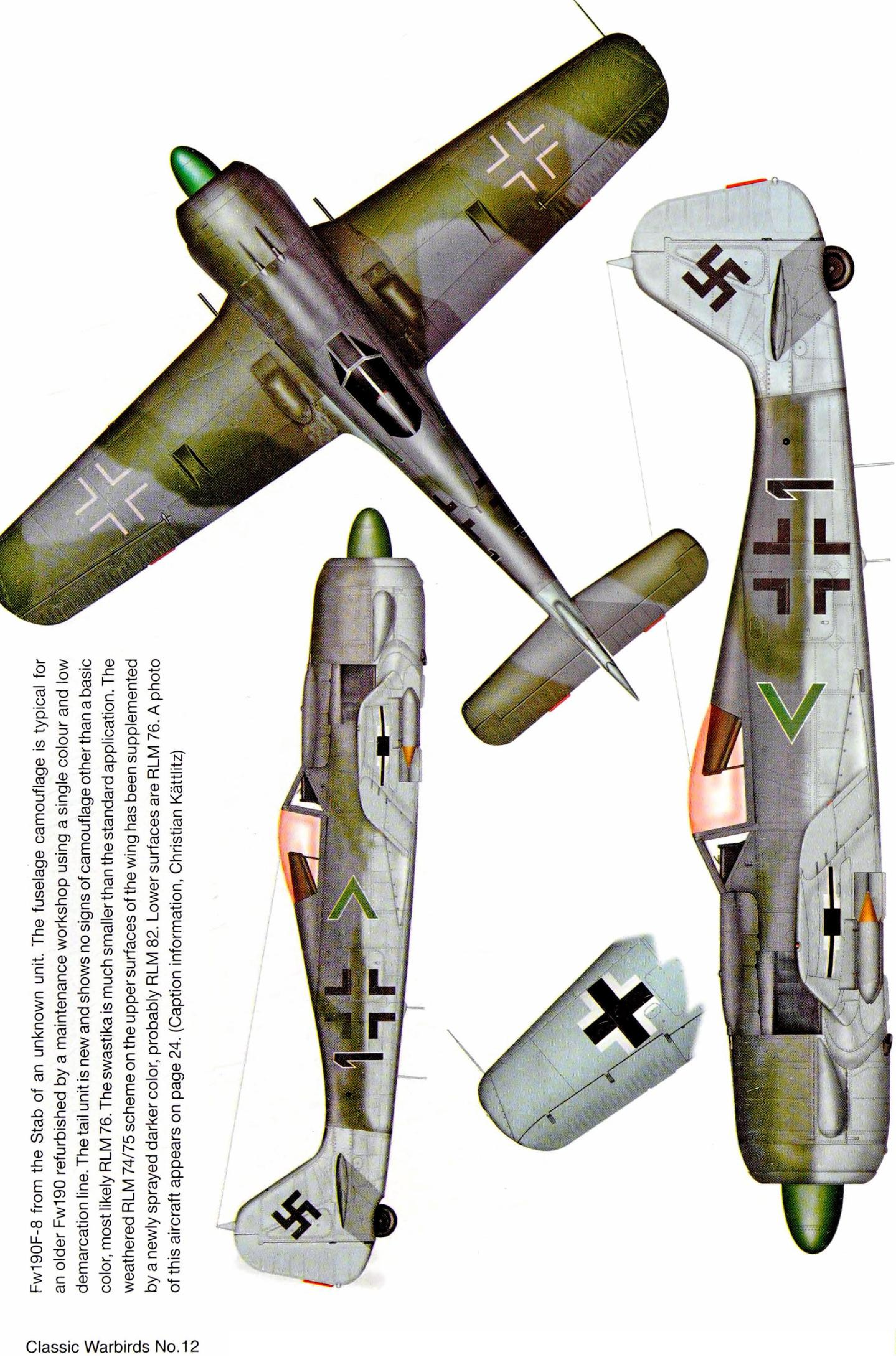
Right. Wing Commander Checketts in November 1943. (J Checketts)











Fw190F-8 from the Stab of an unknown unit. The fuselage camouflage is typical for an older Fw190 refurbished by a maintenance workshop using a single colour and low demarcation line. The tail unit is new and shows no signs of camouflage other than a basic color, most likely RLM 76. The swastika is much smaller than the standard application. The weathered RLM 74/75 scheme on the upper surfaces of the wing has been supplemented by a newly sprayed darker color, probably RLM 82. Lower surfaces are RLM 76. A photo of this aircraft appears on page 24. (Caption information, Christian Kättlitz)

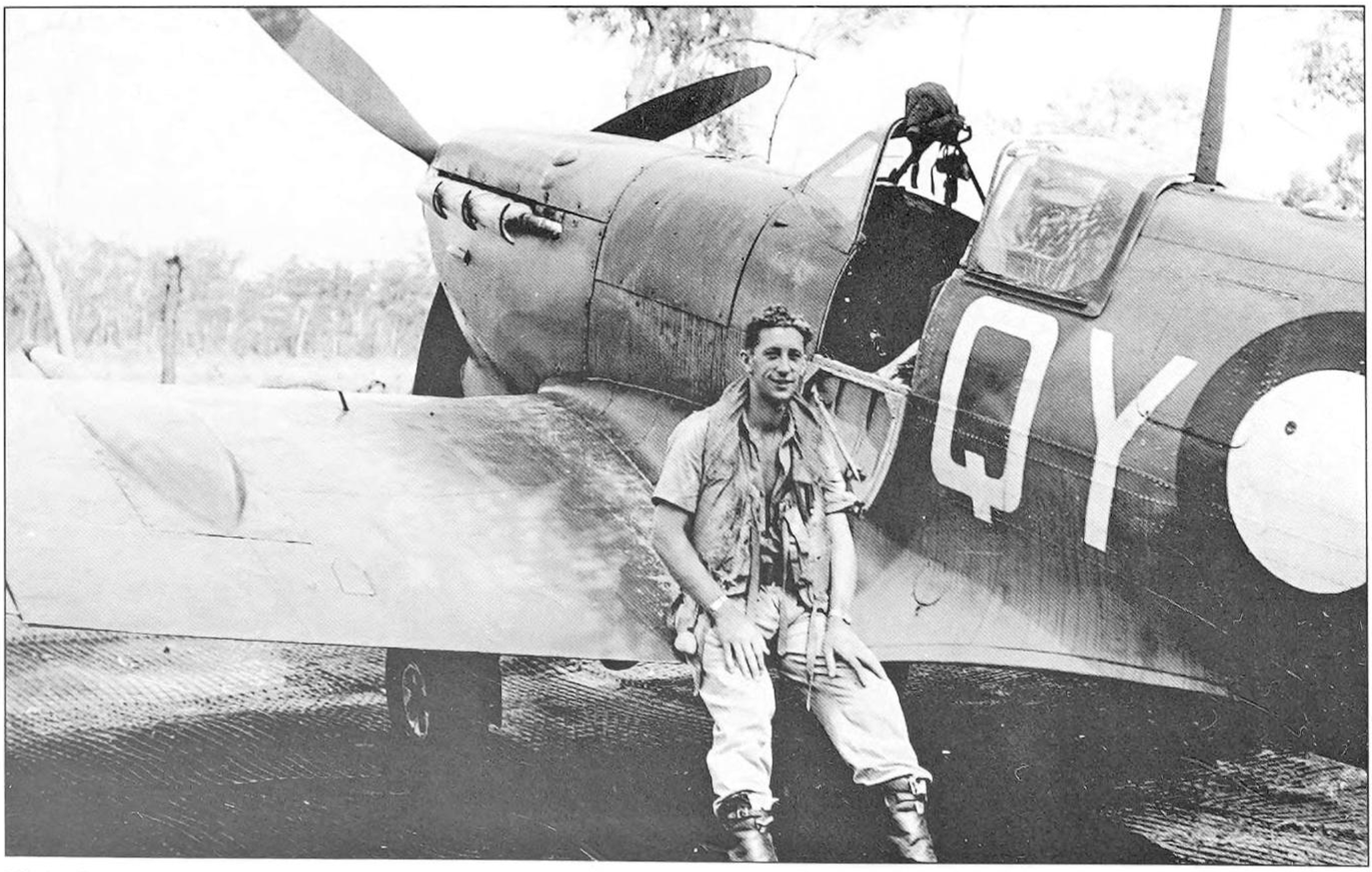
No.1 Wing's time in the NWA theatre. The five 452 Squadron aircraft were instructed to rendezvous with 22 further machines from the Wing, with Thorold-Smith to take command. The usual wing leader, Wing Commander Caldwell was not flying that day. Thorold-Smith was killed, in only his second combat with Japanese aircraft, when his section was 'bounced' by the Japanese fighter escort under controversial circumstances (see 'Spitfires Over Darwin 1943' by Jim Grant). Thereafter Hall and Goldsmith used climb and dive tactics to claim one 'Zero' by Hall and two victories, a 'Betty' and a 'Zero', to Goldsmith.

Hall's second victory in Australia was on 30 June 1943 when Japanese bombers attacked Fenton, where the 380th Bomb Group, USAAF, was stationed. No.1 Wing intercepted the Japanese force before their target with Hall's flight intercepting the escort fighters which apparently did not see them, as no evasive action was observed. Result; Hall was easily able to shoot down a 'Zero'.

His final victory was on 6 July during another raid on Fenton. Hall and his flight engaged the escort fighters from above and behind but Hall was forced to break off the engagement after one victory because his engine was overheating.

When his tour of duty finished Edward Hall was posted to No.2 OTU as an instructor but felt this was not the best use of his talents. Frustrated, he applied for a discharge and returned to his civilian career of grazier. He was discharged 3 November 1944.

Flight Lieutenant Edward Hall at the controls of 'DML Overdale'. (G Callaghan)



Flight Sergeant Colin Duncan with Spitfire Mk Vc (Trop), 'QY-A', BR537. He served with No.452's 'A' Flight at Strauss, Darwin area, 1943. Note the large blister over the cannon bay, the undercarriage indicator protruding from the top of the wing inboard of the cannon bay and the heater pipe leading from the rear of the engine exhaust. (S Mackenzie)

Squadron Leader D H Maclean, *RAAF*

Donald Howell Maclean enlisted in 1940 and trained at No.2 EFTS at Amberley, Queensland before gaining his wings at No.3 SFTS. He was transferred to the U.K where he did his operational training at No.57 O.T.U at RAF Hawarden under the instruction of the famous British ace 'Ginger' Lacey who was chief instructor of 'A' Flight.

He joined No.457 Squadron RAAF at Andreas on the Isle of Man at the start of October 1941 and served with the Squadron in Europe until it was transferred home to Australia in June 1942.

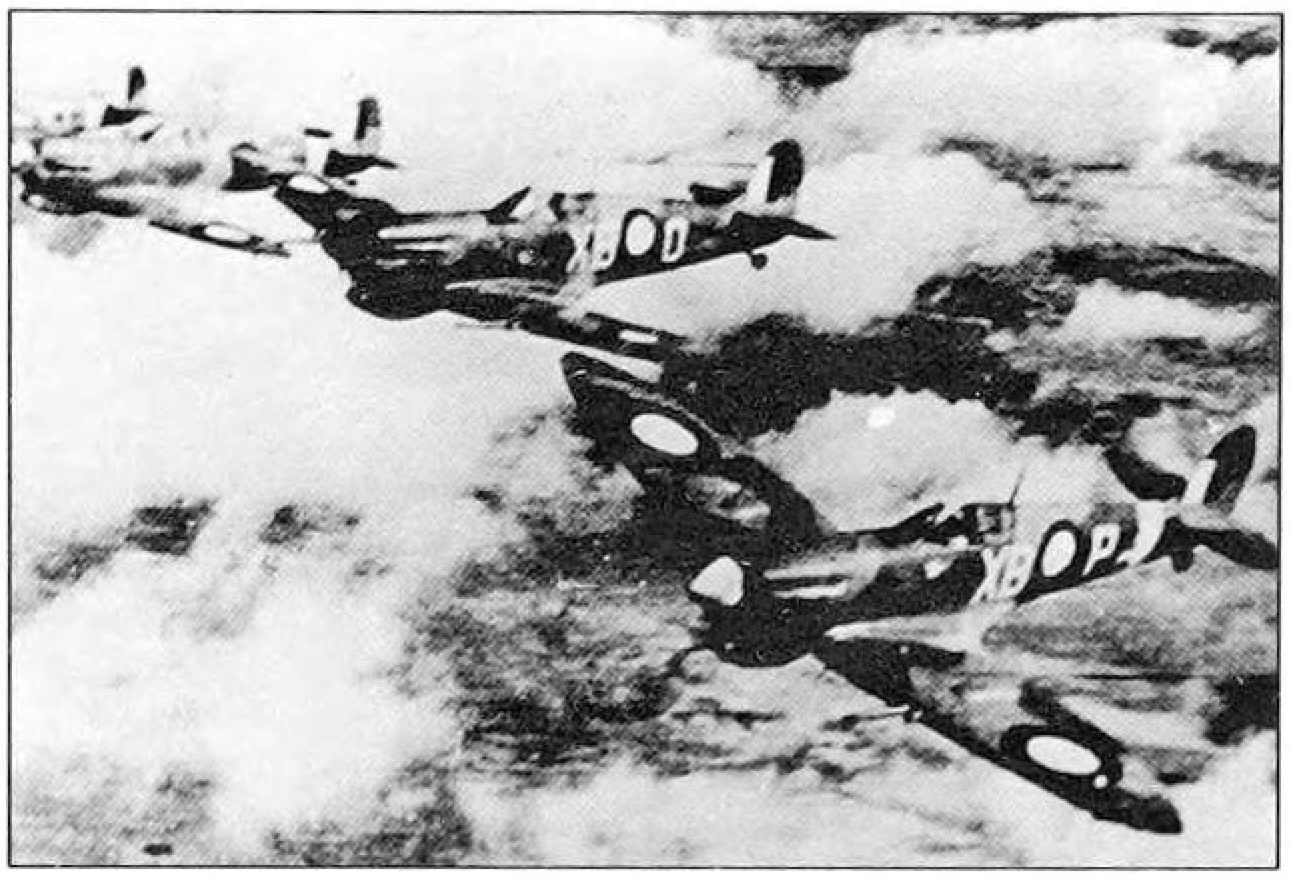
No.457 Squadron moved to Livingstone Airstrip south of Darwin as part of No.1 Fighter Wing RAAF in Jan 1943 to take over the defence of the North West Australia area (NWA), along with No.452 RAAF and No.54 RAF quadrons. Don Maclean who was still serving as commander of 'B' flight flew his personal machine BR589 from Camden to Batchelor in stages, the trip taking 6 days (14 - 19/1/43). The Squadron transferred to Livingstone which was to be its permanent base on 1 February 1943.

While with 457 Squadron he seems to have flown only two personal aircraft for the entire period he served in the NWA. The first was Spitfire Mk Vc (Trop) BR589, 'XB-P' and later 'ZP-P'. BR589 was lost on 5 July 1943 with Flying Officer 'Butch' Hamilton at the controls. Hamilton was shot down and killed intercepting a Japanese raid that day.

The replacement for BR589 was EF543 'ZP-P' that Maclean first flew on 16 July 1943. It was camouflaged similarly to BR589 except for a Black spinner and no Sky fuselage band.

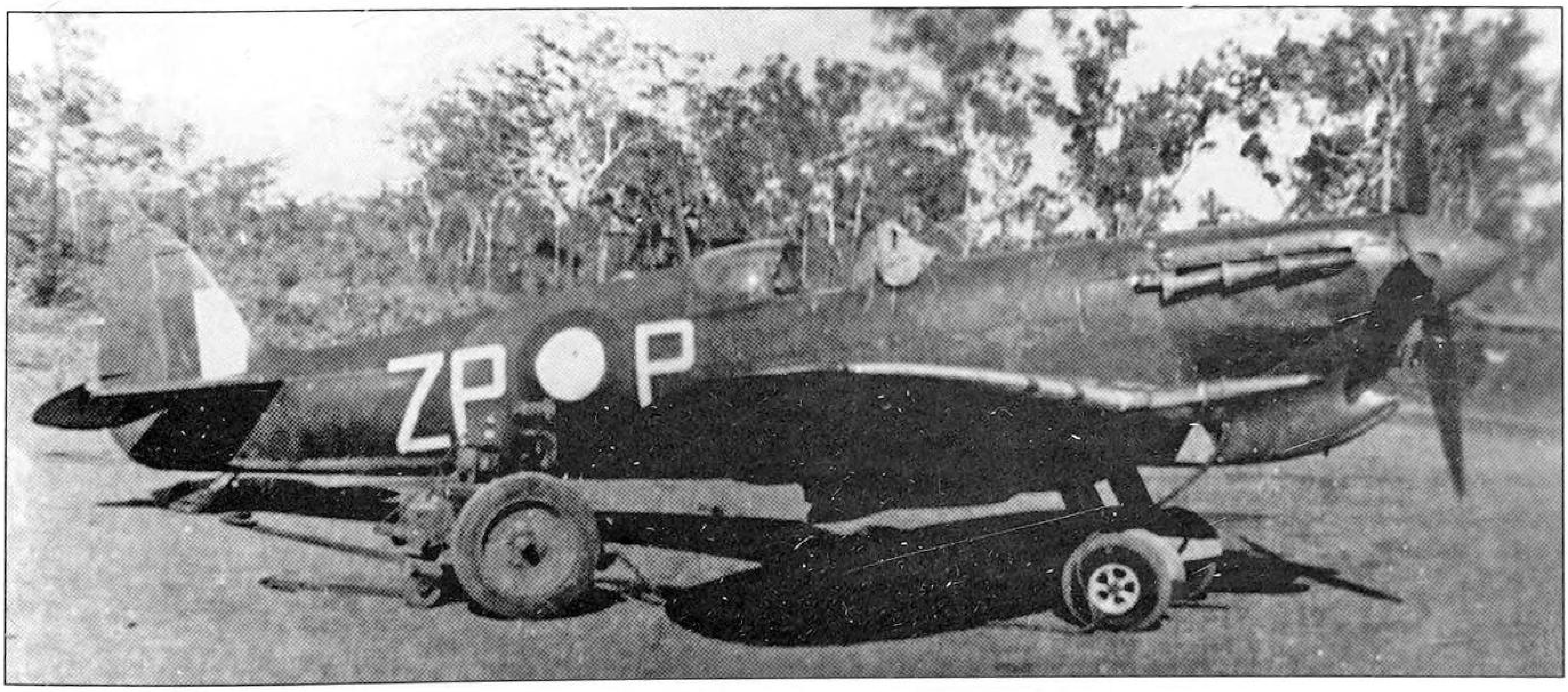
During his operational period in Darwin, Don Maclean claimed three confirmed victories against Japanese aircraft. The first was on 7 March 1943 when Maclean was scrambled flying BR542 'ZP-Z' along with Sergeant F MacDowall in a second Spitfire. The enemy aircraft proved to be a Ki46 'Dinah' recconiassence aircraft and the pair shot it down in flames near Darwin.

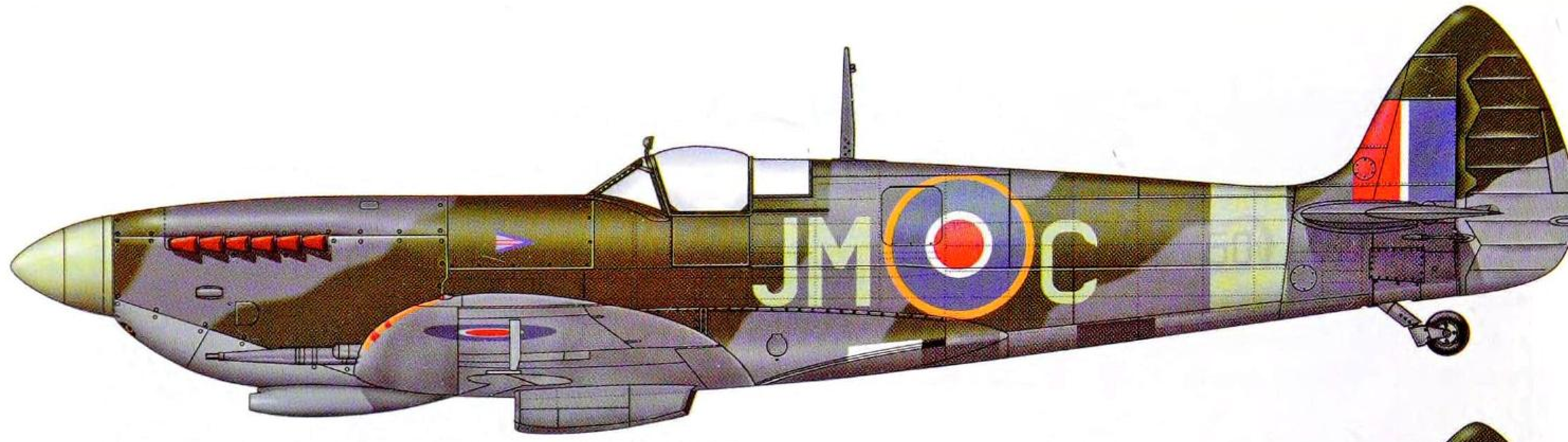
Don's next victory was on 28 June when bombers, with fighter escort, attacked Fenton. The Wing intercepted the raid before its target and Maclean, tasked with intercepting the fighters, was able to destroy a



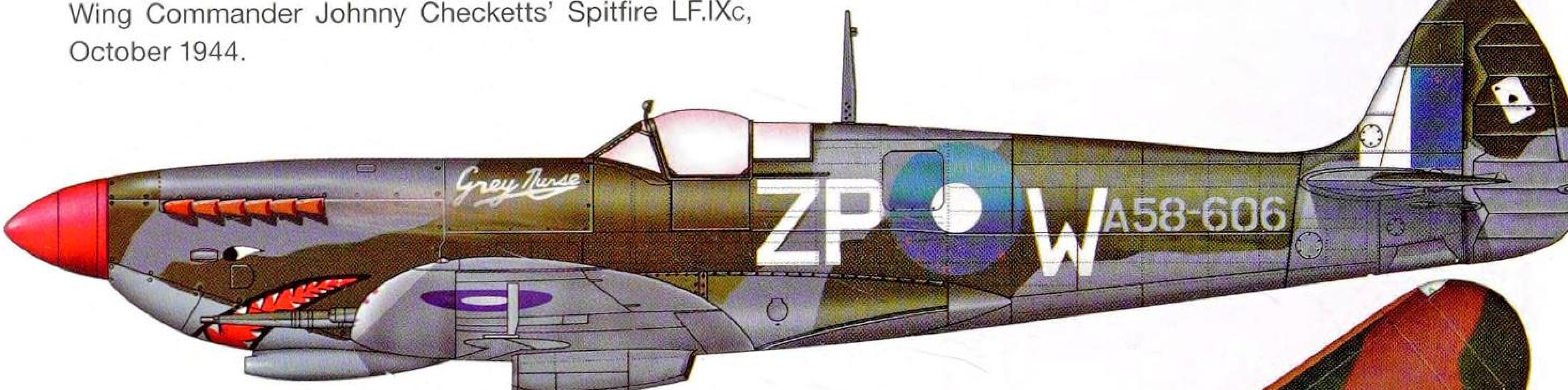
Don Maclean's first Spitfire Mk Vc (Trop) BR589, while still coded coded 'XB-P' and camouflaged Dark Green and Dark Earth upper surfaces with Sky Blue lower surfaces. Light Grey codes and black serials. Spinner and fuselage band were Sky. The fuselage band is unusual for the NWA and was probably eliminated when BR589 was recoded 'ZP-P'.
This frequently published shot was most likely taken on 14 February 1943. (Authors collection)

Don Maclean's second machine in the NWA area was 'ZP-P' EF543 shown in this photo. This aircraft has the standard RAAF scheme for this area of Dark Green/ Dark Earth upper surfaces with Sky Blue lower surfaces. Codes are in white and it carries standard RAAF Dark Blue/White roundels in all positions. (R Livingstone)

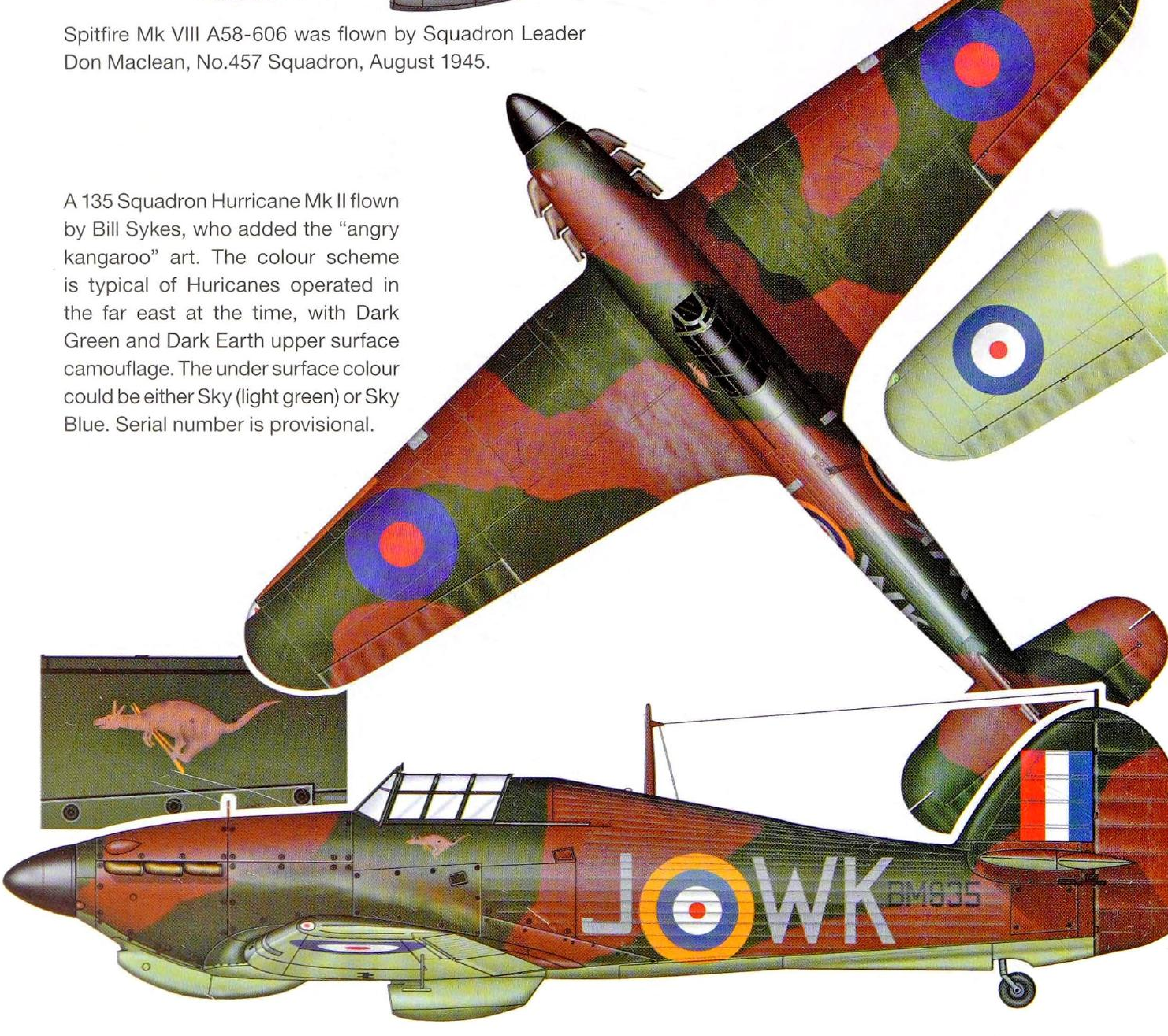




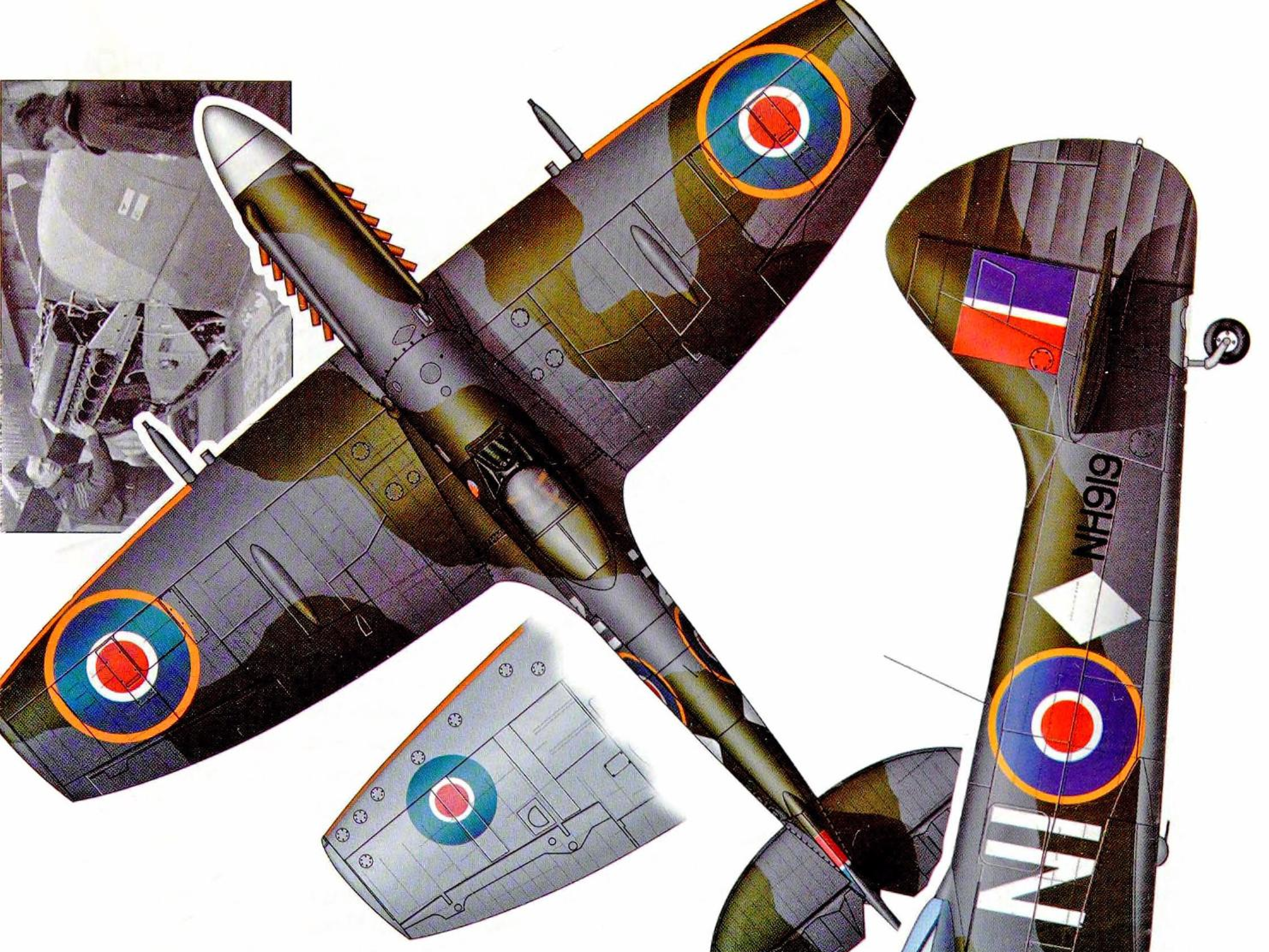
Wing Commander Johnny Checketts' Spitfire LF.IXc, October 1944.

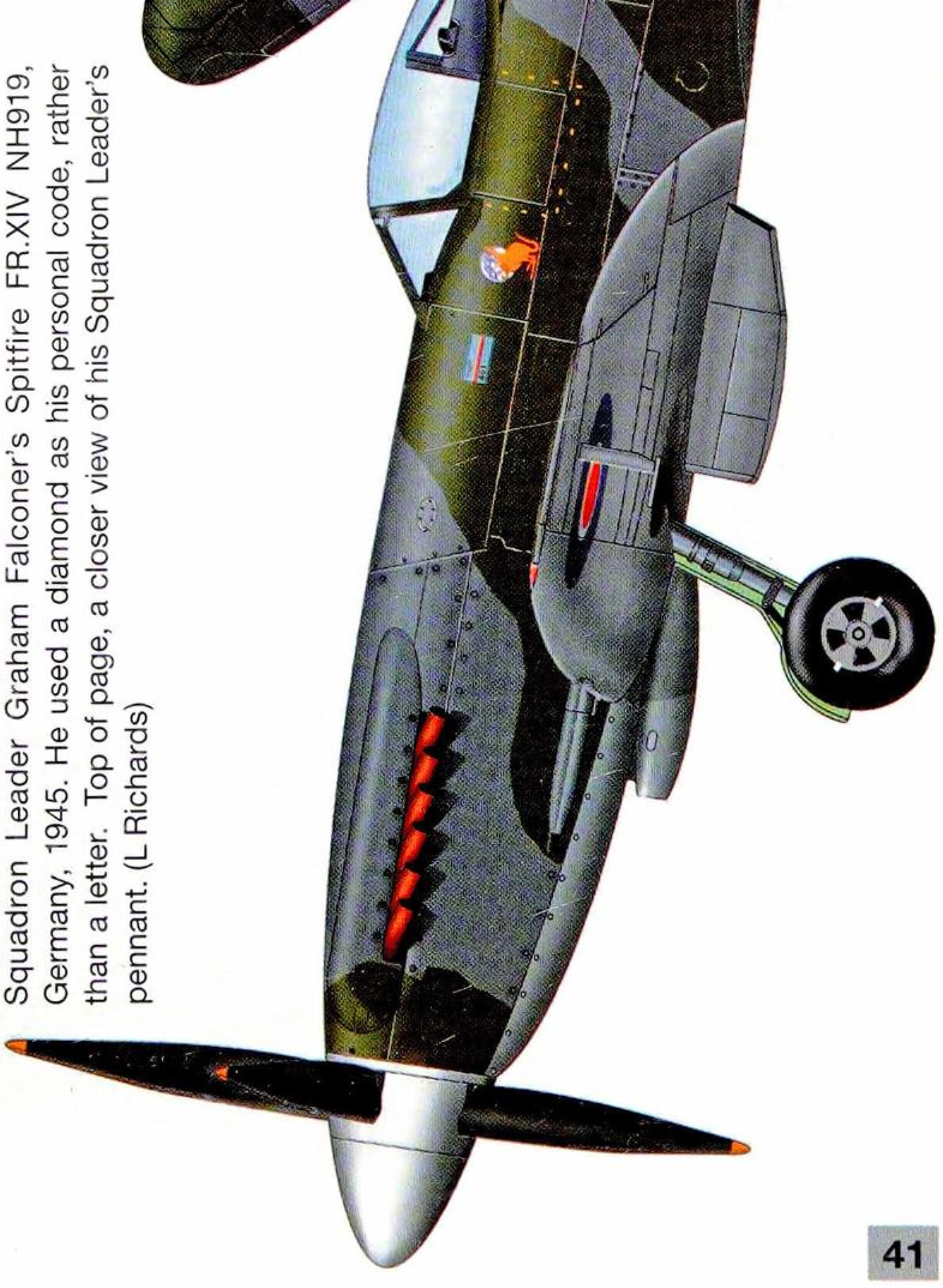


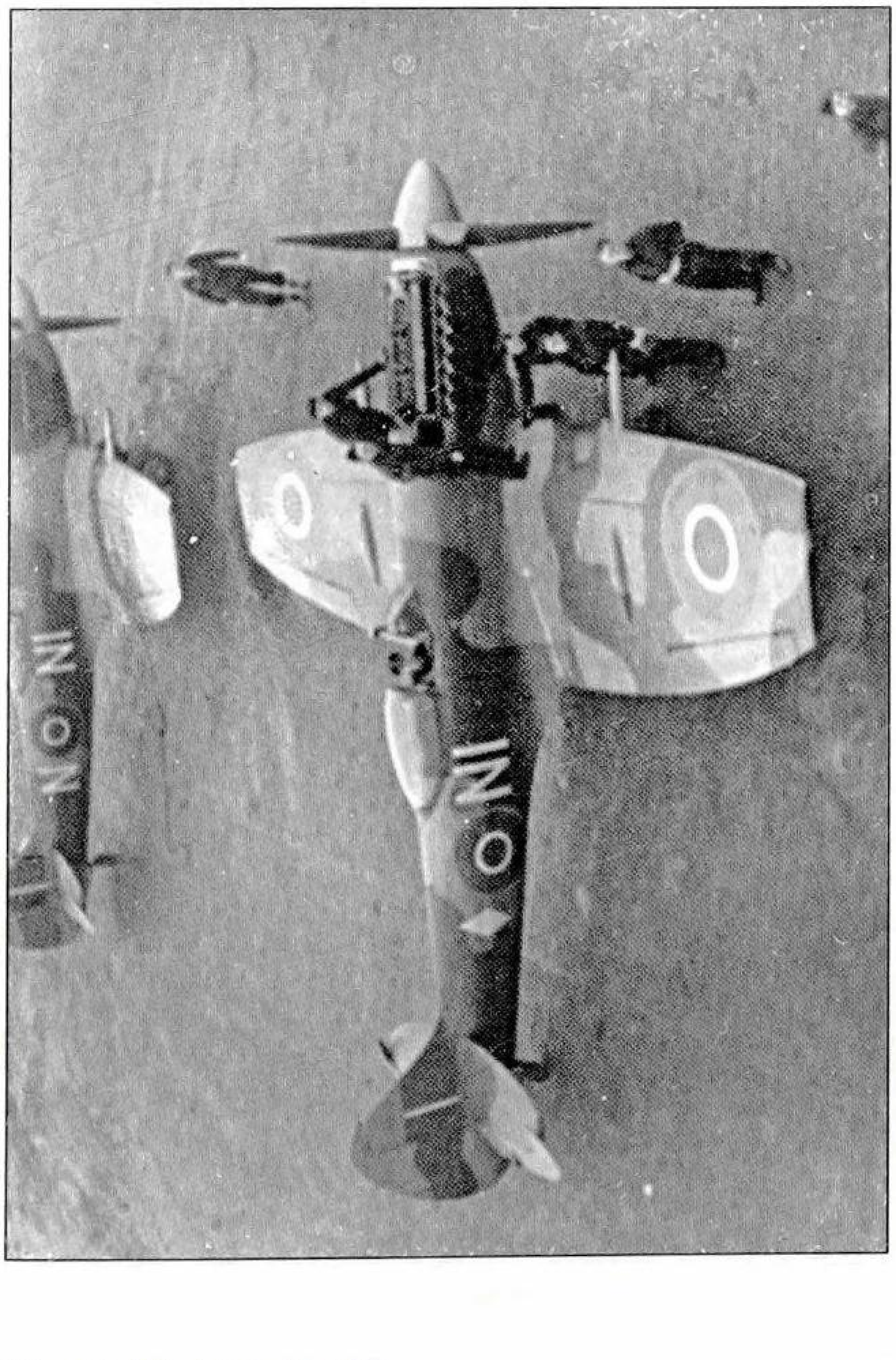
Spitfire Mk VIII A58-606 was flown by Squadron Leader Don Maclean, No.457 Squadron, August 1945.



A 135 Squadron Hurricane Mk II flown by Bill Sykes, who added the "angry kangaroo" art. The colour scheme is typical of Huricanes operated in the far east at the time, with Dark Green and Dark Earth upper surface camouflage. The under surface colour could be either Sky (light green) or Sky Blue. Serial number is provisional.







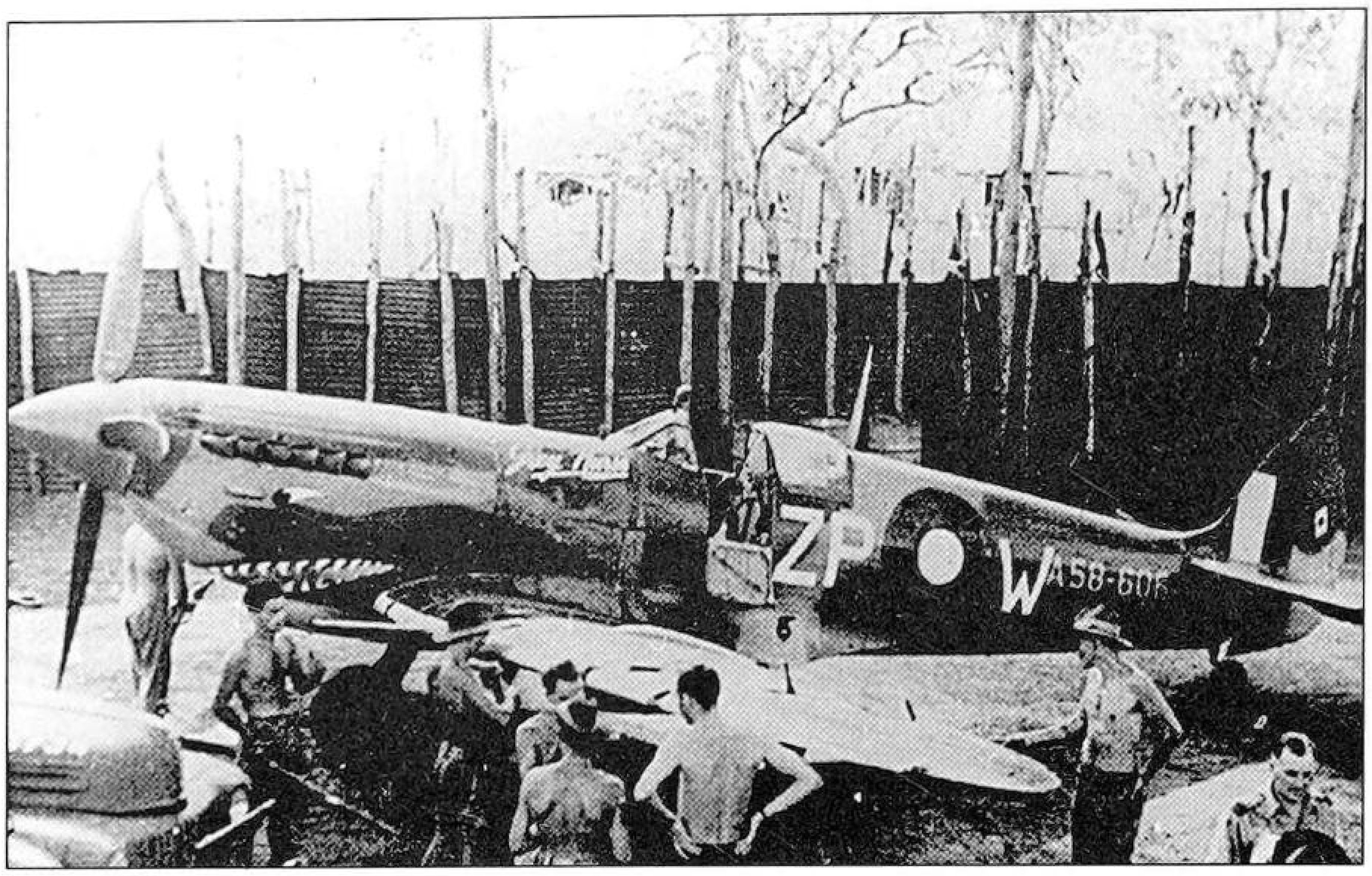
Squadron Leader Graham Falconer's Spitfire FR.XIV NH919, Germany, 1945. He used a diamond as his personal code, rather than a letter. Top of page, a closer view of his Squadron Leader's pennant. (L Richards)

Zero. He was flying BR568 on this occasion.

His final victory was on 7 September 1943 during another scramble against a Japanese 'Dinah' escorted by an estimated 24 fighters. Maclean was credited with one 'Zeke' destroyed and another damaged while flying his own Spifire, EF543. He was also credited with a 'Betty' bomber damaged on 30 June and a 'Dinah' damaged on 6 November 1943. Maclean's last operational flight with No.457 Squadron was on 4 December 1943. He had served for a period of 18 months as leader of 'B' Flight.

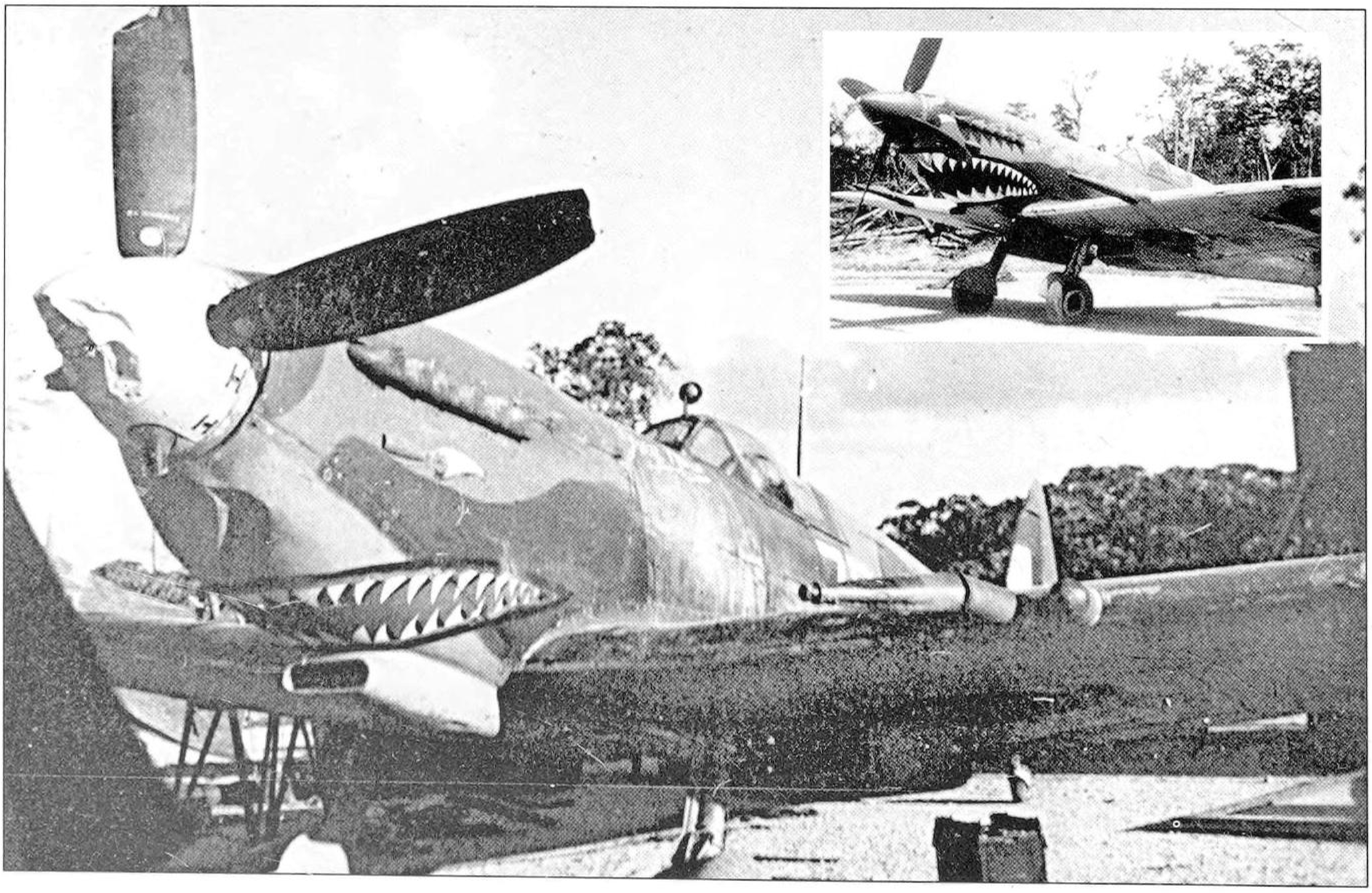
With his tour over he was sent to No.2 OTU Mildura as an instructor and from May 1945 onwards, he served in the same role with No.8 OTU at Parkes. In August 1945 Maclean was promoted to Squadron Leader and returned to No.457 Squadron as its last wartime commander.

As the war ended on 15 August 1945 he only flew a few operations as leader before the end of hostilities. The machine that he flew at this time appears to have been Spitfire Mk VIII A58-606 'ZP-W' which had belonged to the previous CO Squadron Leader Bruce Watson. Don Maclean's operational service ended in November 1945 with the disbandment of No.457 Squadron. He had served all his operational time with this same unit rising from Pilot Officer to eventually become its last Commanding Officer.

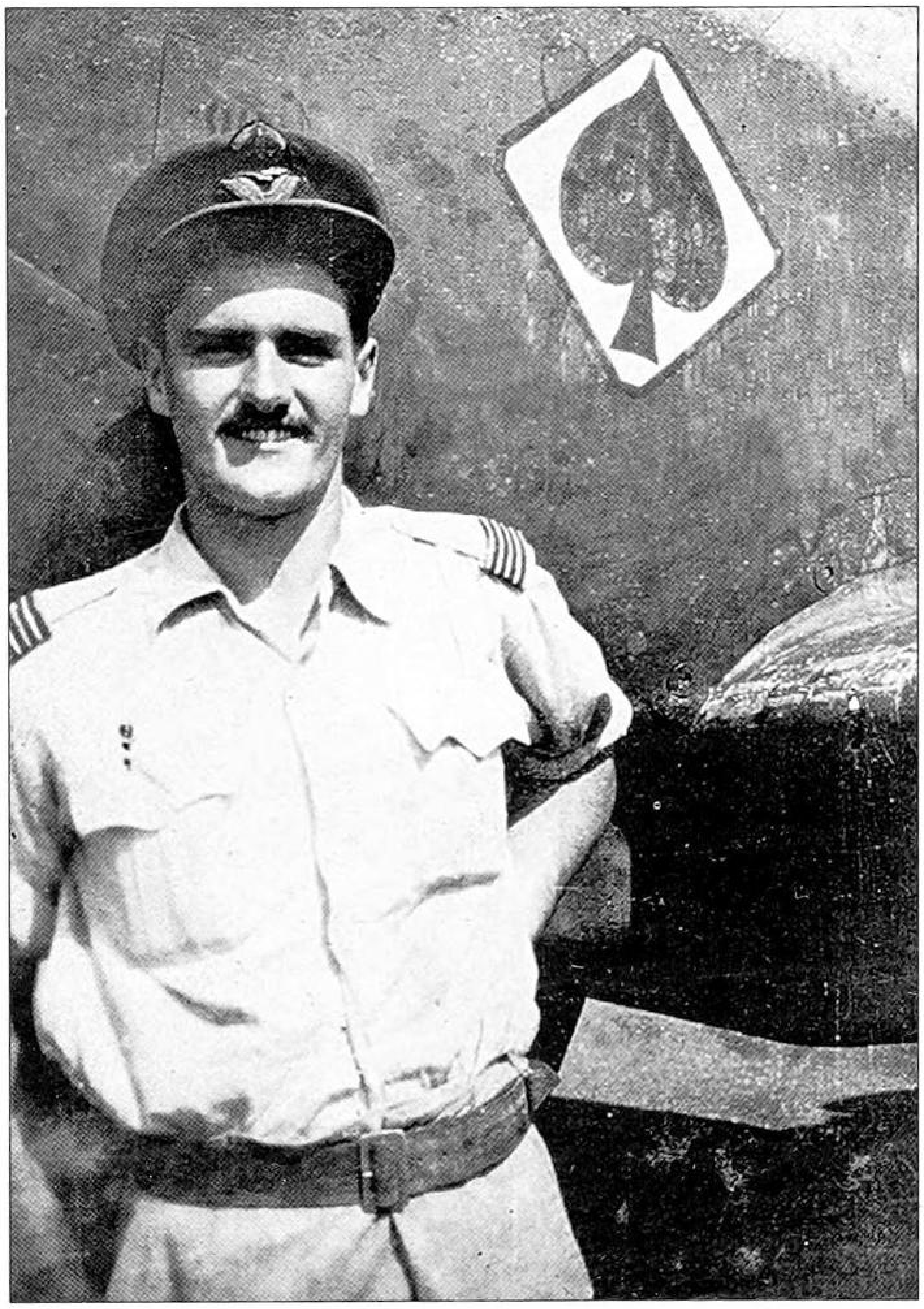


The aircraft that Don Maclean generally flew on the few operations he completed as No.457 Squadron's leader in August 1945 was Spitfire Mk VIII A58-606 'ZP-W'. This photo was taken when it belonged to his predecessor, Bruce Watson. (R Livingstone)

Spitfire MK VIII A58-617 'ZP-G' damaged in a night take-off accident on Moratia Island 24 March 1945. Inset is a Mk VIII with 457 Sqn's later large shark mouth. (F Smith)



FLIGHT LIEUTENANT A McG PEART, DFC RNZAF



Flight Lieutenant Alan Peart with a Spitfire Mk VIII in Ceylon, 1944, near the end of his overseas operational career.
No.81 Squadron 'souvenired' the ace-of-spades emblem from the Luftwaffe's JG 53 which it fought against in North Africa. (A Peart)

As a boy Alan McGregor Peart dreamed of flying. His dream became an ambition when his father gave him a cigarette card picturing the prototype Spitfire in 1936 and when WWII started his ambition crystalised into becoming a Spitfire pilot in the RAF.

"On my eighteenth birthday I really put the pressure on my parents and they finally agreed to sign the papers (to serve overseas before the age of 21). To be accepted by the Air Force, applicants were required to pass a 21 week course of study. I completed all 21 assignments in one week, I was so keen... naively keen I suppose.

"Initial training for me, was at Levin, (north of Wellington, New Zealand) with physical education in the morning then 'square bashing' and a three mile run in the afternoon. Incidentally I shared a hut with (then) Air Vice Marshal Keith Parks' nephew Nigel, who was later killed in Malta."

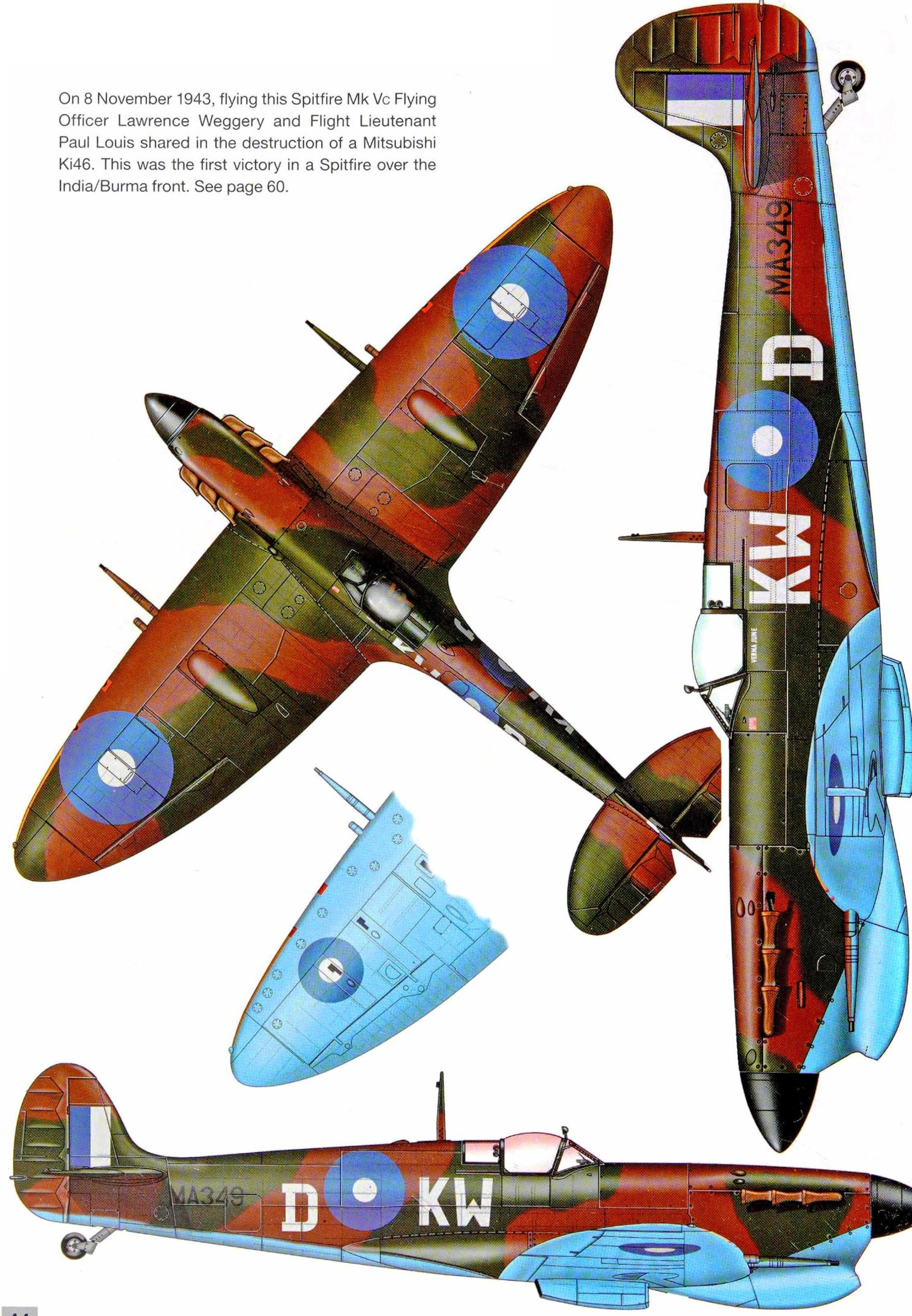
One aspect of this early training that stuck in Peart's mind was the continual medical examinations that air crew candidates were required to endure. It seemed that with every further stage in the training process they were required to pass a medical board intent on weeding out anyone not in peak physical or mental condition. This led to a humorous incident at his basic flying training course at Bell Block, New Plymouth. The recruits had to pass a medical board and I was scared that I might be wiped for some minor thing they might find. My pulse was racing and the doctor asked if I had been running and so I said Yes and was told to 'go into that room and calm down'. Well, if anything my pulse increased with the fear of being dropped. So when I came back it was at least 120 and he said 'you better come back later', I never did go back and they never asked! Anyway, I must have passed in other respects and flying training soon began.

"My first instructor was Pilot Officer Clark and off we went in a Tiger Moth. I thought this was marvellous!"

Part way through the training process, now at Ohakea, the aspiring pilots were divided into those the Air Force selected to train on multi engine types (bombers and transports) and single engine types (fighters). Peart found himself assigned to train on multi engine types.

"I always considered myself a fairly retiring sort of person but was not going to put up with that. I remember asking for an audience with the Station Commanding Officer, going into his office and asking why I was put onto bombers. He said, 'well that's the selection that's been made'. I told him the story that all my life I'd wanted to fly fighters etc. I just about thumped the table and told him that I wasn't interested in flying unless it was on fighters, thank you, and stalked out! Well, as a lowly LAC, which was our rank at the time and him being a Wing Commander, it says a lot for the system that they appreciated the younger people, because I didn't hear anything more about my behaviour and found myself on the fighter course! Eventually we graduated and I recall a great deal of pride wearing my pilots 'Wings'."

On 8 November 1943, flying this Spitfire Mk Vc Flying Officer Lawrence Weggery and Flight Lieutenant Paul Louis shared in the destruction of a Mitsubishi Ki46. This was the first victory in a Spitfire over the India/Burma front. See page 60.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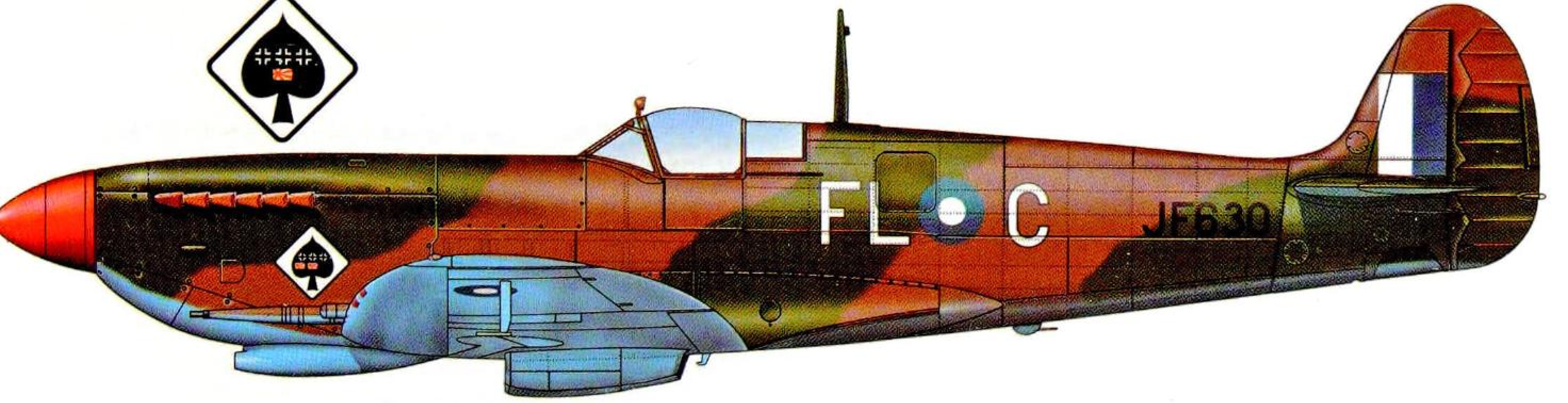
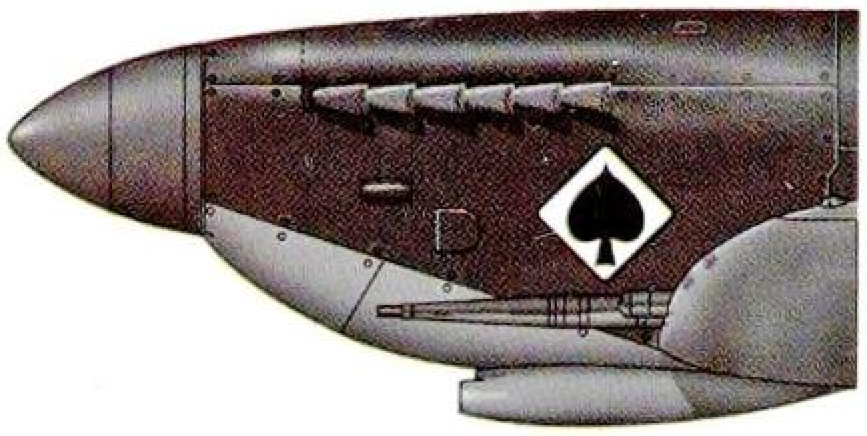
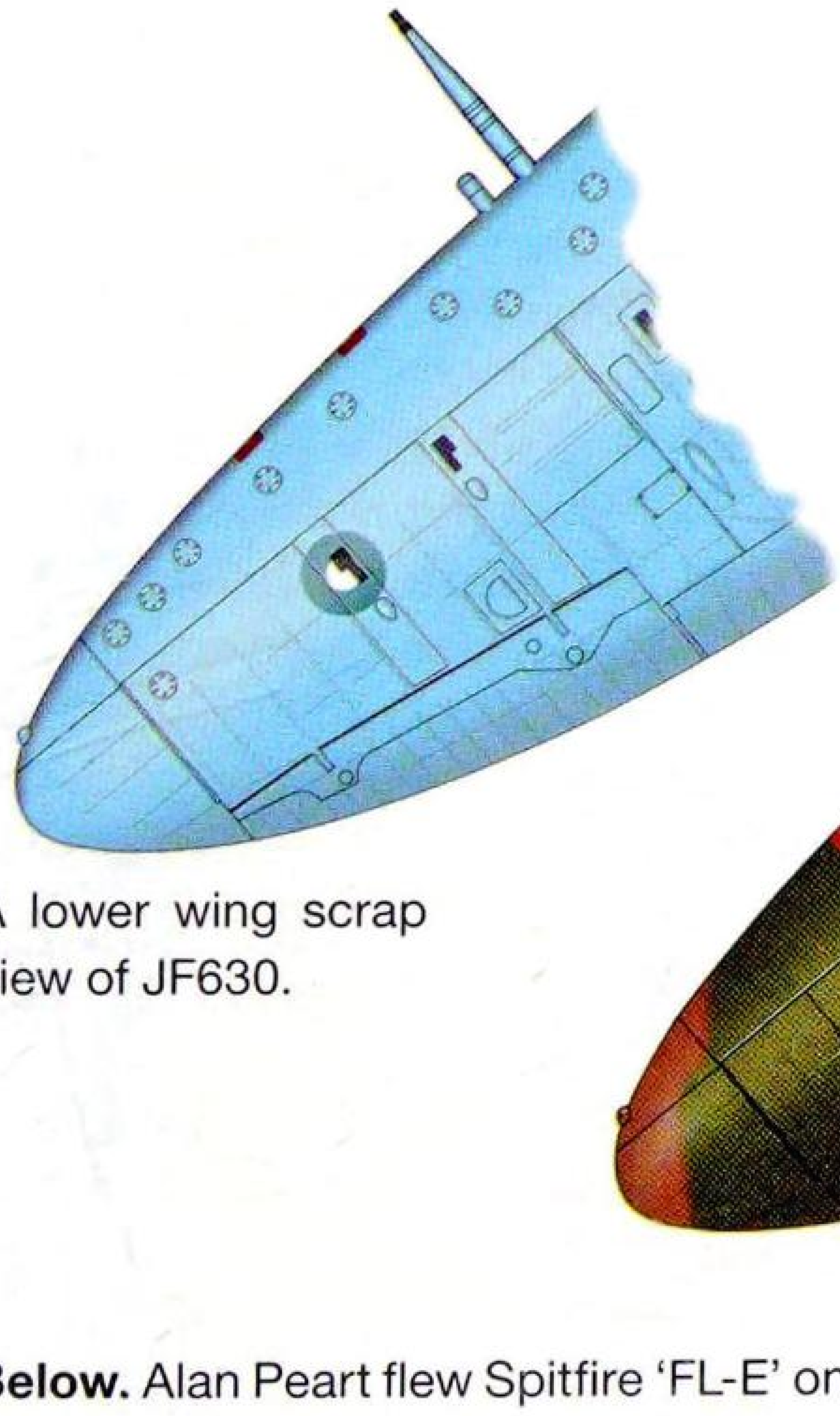


Spitfire Mk VIII JF630 as flown by Flying Officer Larry Cronin in India, March 1944. Our photo of Cronin on page one shows him just before he achieved his fifth and final victory on 14 March 1944. We have added the second Japanese flag, as he no doubt did too!

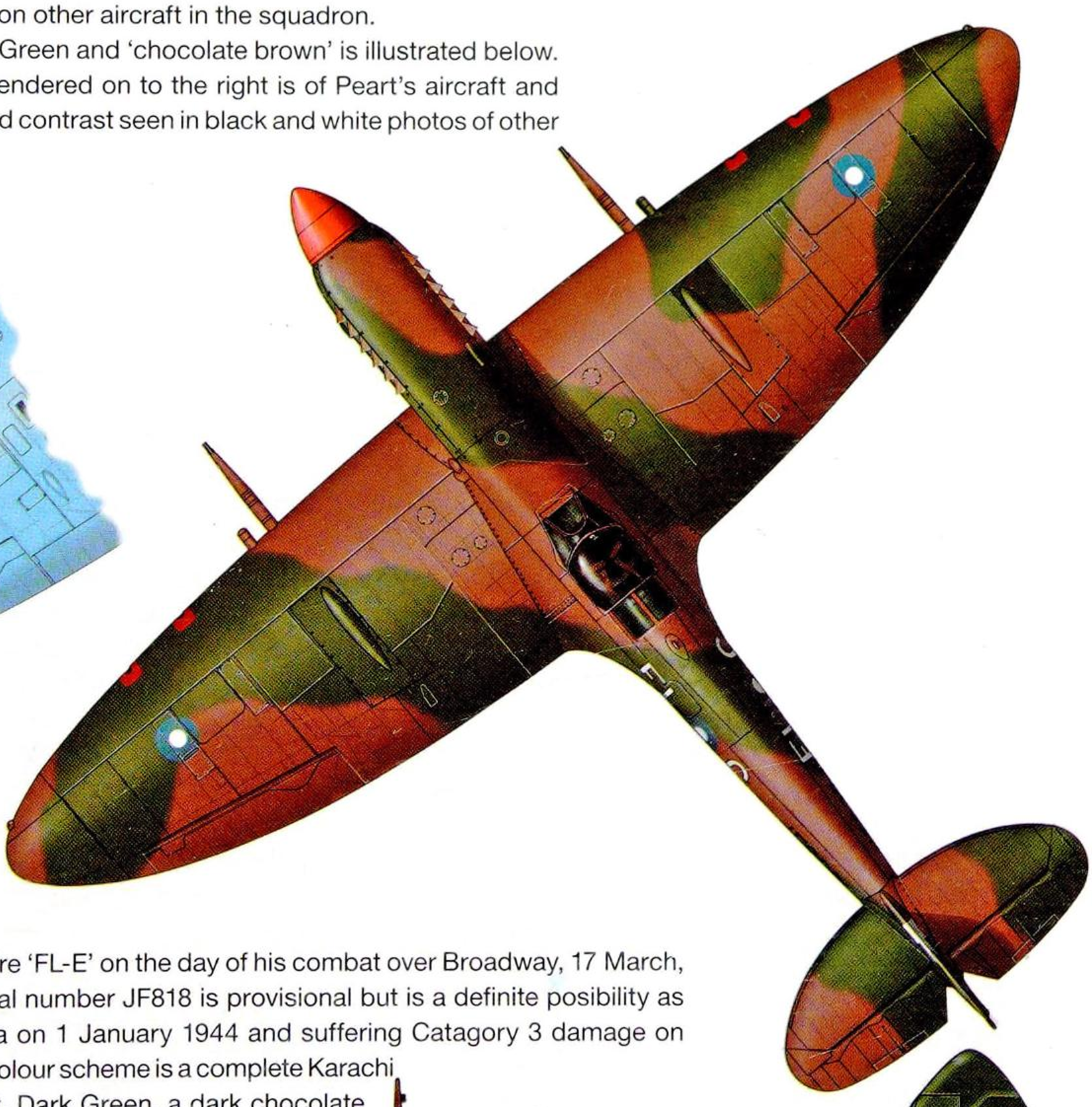
The photo on page one shows that JF630 had more contrast between its upper surface colours than other 81 Squadron Mk VIIIs repainted in Karatchi. It could be that it remained in Desert Scheme camouflage. However the author's opinion is that the upper surface brown used on JF630 was simply mixed lighter than the 'chocolate brown' used on other aircraft in the squadron.

Alan Peart's aircraft in Dark Green and 'chocolate brown' is illustrated below. The black and white nose rendered on to the right is of Peart's aircraft and demonstrates the very limited contrast seen in black and white photos of other aircraft in the squadron.

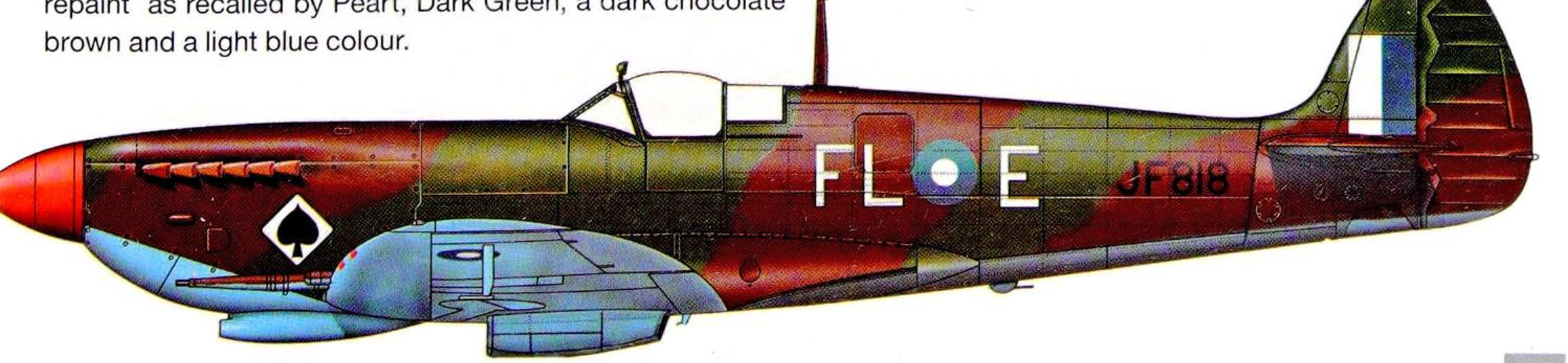




A lower wing scrap view of JF630.



Below. Alan Peart flew Spitfire 'FL-E' on the day of his combat over Broadway, 17 March, 1944. See page 55. The serial number JF818 is provisional but is a definite posibility as it is listed as arriving in India on 1 January 1944 and suffering Catagory 3 damage on operations, 17 March 1944. Colour scheme is a complete Karachi repaint as recalled by Peart, Dark Green, a dark chocolate brown and a light blue colour.



OVERSEAS

Along with all graduates of his course Alan Peart was promoted to Sergeant Pilot. He was posted overseas in October 1941 and travelled via the USA and Canada to Britain. At one stage his group were billeted in a partly completed hotel in Hastings in which the lifts had not been installed. Peart's group was on the 13th floor and it was so cold they wore all their clothes plus layers of newspaper to keep warm in bed at night.

"We sent delegations to the New Zealand High Commission in London complaining about out plight, but were told that at least we would be kept fit by having to use the stairs!"

The war moved a step closer to Peart with a posting to the RAF training base Hullavington on 25 February 1942 where he trained on Miles Masters ("a tremendous advance on the Hawker Hind biplanes we trained on in New Zealand, fully aerobatic and much faster") and experienced his first flight in a modern fighter, a Hawker Hurricane.

"My first flight in the Hurricane felt like sitting in a rocket. People can laugh now having regard to modern jets, but then it really was a high performance fighter."

Then followed a two month period at No.55 OTU Annan, Scotland, learning to fly and fight in Hurricane Mk Is. Although the Hurricane was an eight gun fighter only two guns were used, to save ammunition.

"The OTU course was first, to train you to fly a modern fighter and second, to fight with it as an extension of your body. You could be a very good pilot but to fight was a very different matter. The OTU course comprised navigation, cloud 'chasing', formation flying through cloud, firing at towed drogues, aerobatics, ground attack and 'dog fighting'.

"I must comment on what I later found was a gross inadequacy of aerial gunnery training – you were expected to become skilled at 'snap shooting'. If you can imagine trying to shoot at a fly ducking and weaving, it's easy to realise how hard it is to hit a target which is flying in three dimensions while your aircraft is slipping and skidding such that your bullets are being thrown sideways. It was only very much later that we were given any analysis or training in dealing with these things. Firing at a drogue was really not good enough."

FIRST OPERATIONAL POSTING

Peart's first operational posting was to 610 (County of Chester) Squadron, 12 Group at Ludham, Norfolk in July 1942.

"I remember travelling by train to Coltishall, which was the main RAF base in the area, of which Ludham was a satellite. I contemplated what I was about to do as up until that stage the flying, although dangerous, was a great game. It was exciting, you learnt to fly, it was absolutely marvellous!

"The awful truth dawned on me that this was the real thing now; was it going to be like the First World War, flying into combat as a tyro only to be shot down by some German expert? It caused me some very deep thought and some qualms too. However, I thought others have gone through this, so lets see what happens."

As a new Sergeant pilot he was assigned to a Nissen hut ('mighty cold at night') as sleeping quarters and introduced to the comfortable Sergeants' Mess. At that time the Squadron was without a CO and it was two weeks later that Johnnie Johnson arrived. It was his first command.

"He was already a recognised Ace and a nicer person I could not imagine. He was a very fine person indeed. The RAF, I suppose, followed certain mores... the COs often had dogs and drove around in sporty MGs. There was a certain panache about them and Johnnie Johnson was no exception. He made no class distinction between NCO pilots and Officers, he treated us all just as pilots and was a very welcome addition to the Squadron.

"At that stage I was a veritable tyro, I had seen nothing (of aerial warfare)!"

At No.610 Squadron, Sergeant Pilot Peart was introduced to the Spitfire, the type in which he was to achieve all his combat victories. He recalls his first flight in a Spitfire Mk V...

"Having studied the pilots' notes and psyched myself up I taxied out and was given permission by the air traffic controller to take off. I had to abort before I had even started rolling... the aeroplane spun around in a circle and I couldn't stop it – I'd opened the throttle far to quickly! The second time I opened it more slowly and applied full right rudder and full right trim. Like the earlier Hurricane, I thought I was sitting in a rocket and flew around for a while before managing to land without breaking anything."

Like other new pilots at this stage of the war against the Germans, Peart was fortunate to be allowed time to develop his skills with low risk patrols, local familiarisation flights, strafing enemy shipping and sweeps over the Dutch coast.

A BRIEFING TO REMEMBER

"The next step up (for me) was joining No.11 Group Squadrons for fighter sweeps over France and it was here that I got one of my first little shocks. We flew down to West Malling aerodrome. Remember this was the period when the Fw 190s were superior to the Spitfire Mk Vs of the RAF.

"The Briefing Officer explained that we could expect a certain number of enemy fighters etc. I was thinking in terms of 60 to 80 enemy fighters against us... this sounds great! The briefing went on however, 'we could also expect 25% casualties' and naturally I wasn't very impressed with that remark!

"I looked around the room which was full of experienced fighter pilots – some highly decorated – and realised what a real 'Sprog' I was, as was the term. When the briefing finished everyone relaxed and lit up cigarettes. I noticed that some of these highly decorated people's hands were shaking so much that they could hardly get the cigarette to their mouths. When they finally did, it was with an enormous sense of relief that they drew in the smoke. I didn't smoke at the time and thought, 'there must be something in this habit,' so that's what started me smoking!

"On these fighter sweeps I can remember seeing the Focke Wulfs above us leaving vapour trails almost doing aerobatics, such was their advantage in performance at altitude."

As a new pilot Peart was assigned the No.4 position in a flight of four. "As 'tail end charlie' you were most likely to be hit as no one else was protecting your tail and you spent more time trying to keep in formation.

"The Squadron took part in protecting the Dieppe landings and suffered a number of casualties. Dieppe turned out to be one of the war's largest fighter versus fighter confrontations and, overall, the German Luftwaffe won the day."

There followed a rest period for No.610 in Scotland and from there Peart volunteered for service in Malta. He was not accepted due to his lack of experience, but swapped places with a fellow Sergeant Pilot who was married and so went anyway.

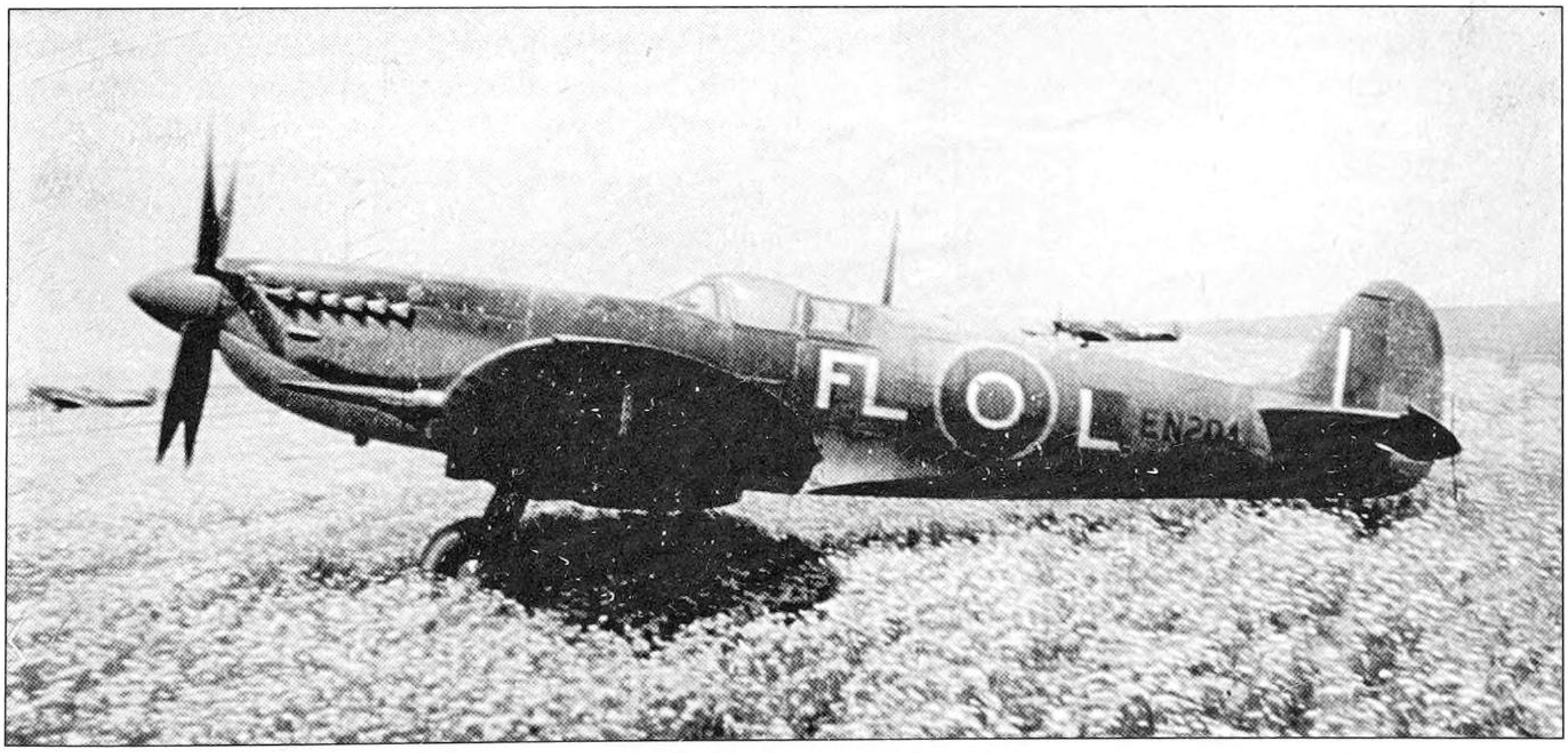
ON TO NORTH AFRICA

Eventually, via Gibraltar, where he was temporarily assigned to fly Hurricane night fighters – totally unsuited to the task – Peart found his way, without an official posting, to No.81 Squadron in North Africa.

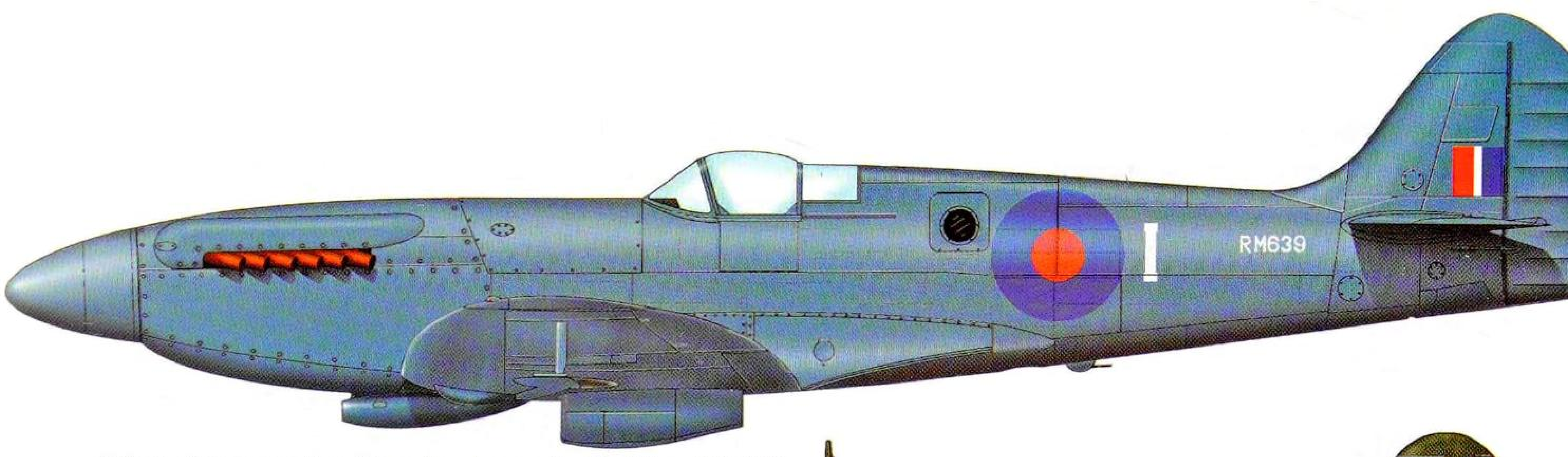
The British 8th Army was advancing in Algeria and No.81 operated from Maison Blanche from November 1942 flying Spitfire Mk Vs. The military situation was particularly confused in the early stages of the campaign with a fluid front line. The Allies advance 'schedule' was such that the day No.81 Squadron flew into Maison Blanche, just outside Algiers, the Army had not yet arrived.

"The airfield was still under the control of Vichy French forces and one of our Spitfire Mk Vs was shot down by a Dewotine 520 as it landed. An argument ensued between Squadron Leader 'Razz' Berry and the French Base Commander as to whom was who's prisoner! Fortunately a British tank appeared on the scene and it was clear that the airfield would be taken."

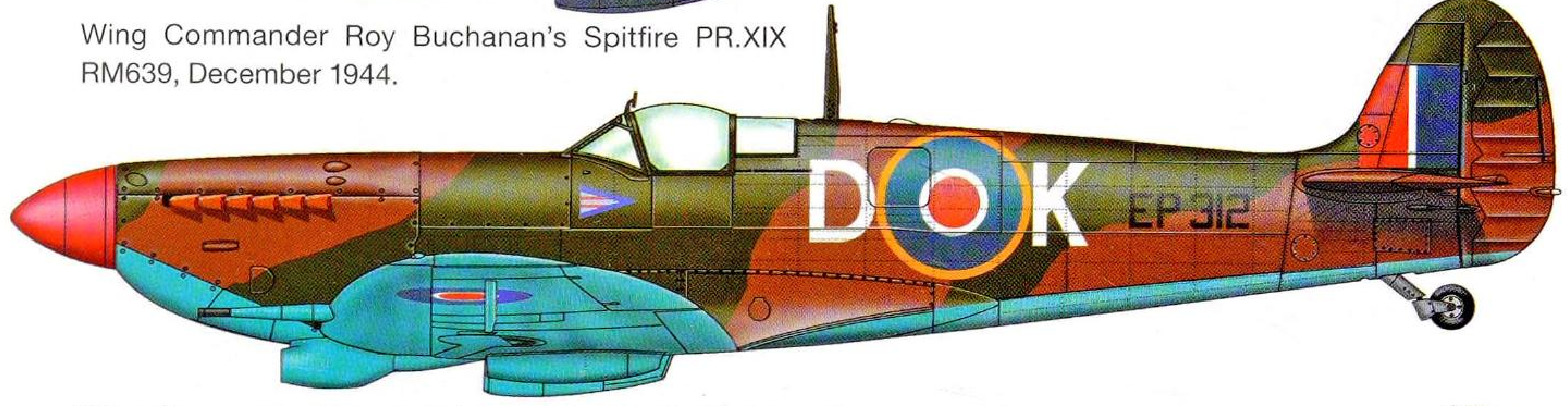
Peart achieved his first victory on 1 December 1942, an Italian Savoia-Marchetti SM.79 three engine bomber, and damaged another. No.81 Squadron's Spitfire Mk V (Trops) were no match for the German Fw 190A and Bf 109G fighters – they lost about ten pilots killed prior to being re-equipped with Spitfire Mk IXs. Peart was sent to Gibraltar on 18 January to collect one of the new Mk IXs and returned to North Africa, with the Squadron, to Bône, Algeria on 27 January 1943. At Bône the Squadron's airfield was regularly bombed and strafed by the *Luftwaffe* and *Regia Aeronautica*. On occasions they would also drop small booby trapped



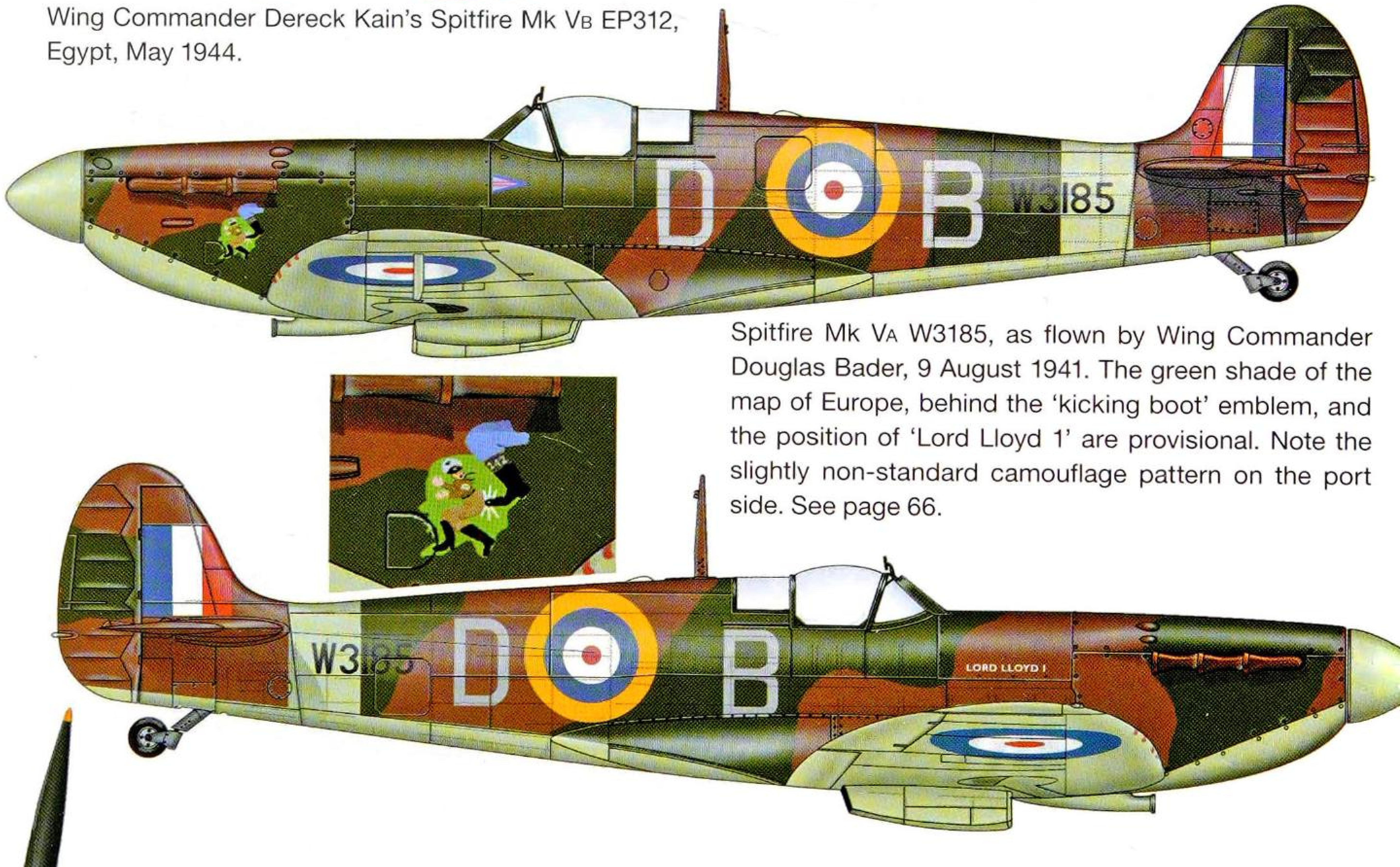
Warrant Officer Larry Cronin's Spitfire Mk IXc 'FL-L', serial EN204, at Protville where the Squadron rested at the end of the Tunisian campaign, before moving on to Malta. "We got up late, shot off German firearms and generally played fast and loose!" Peart's usual aircraft at this time was 'FL-D', serial EN207. The Squadron's Spitfires were in the standard RAF desert scheme and had white codes and red spinners. Note the desert wild flowers. (A Peart)



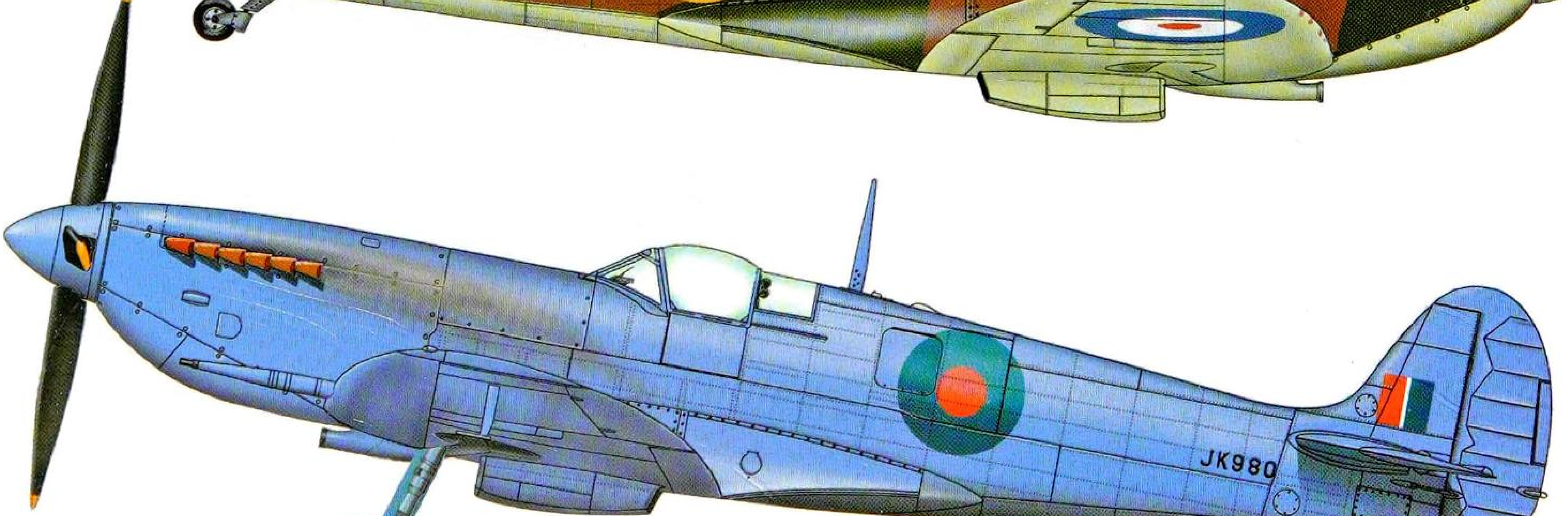
Wing Commander Roy Buchanan's Spitfire PR.XIX RM639, December 1944.



Wing Commander Dereck Kain's Spitfire Mk VB EP312, Egypt, May 1944.



Spitfire Mk VA W3185, as flown by Wing Commander Douglas Bader, 9 August 1941. The green shade of the map of Europe, behind the 'kicking boot' emblem, and the position of 'Lord Lloyd 1' are provisional. Note the slightly non-standard camouflage pattern on the port side. See page 66.



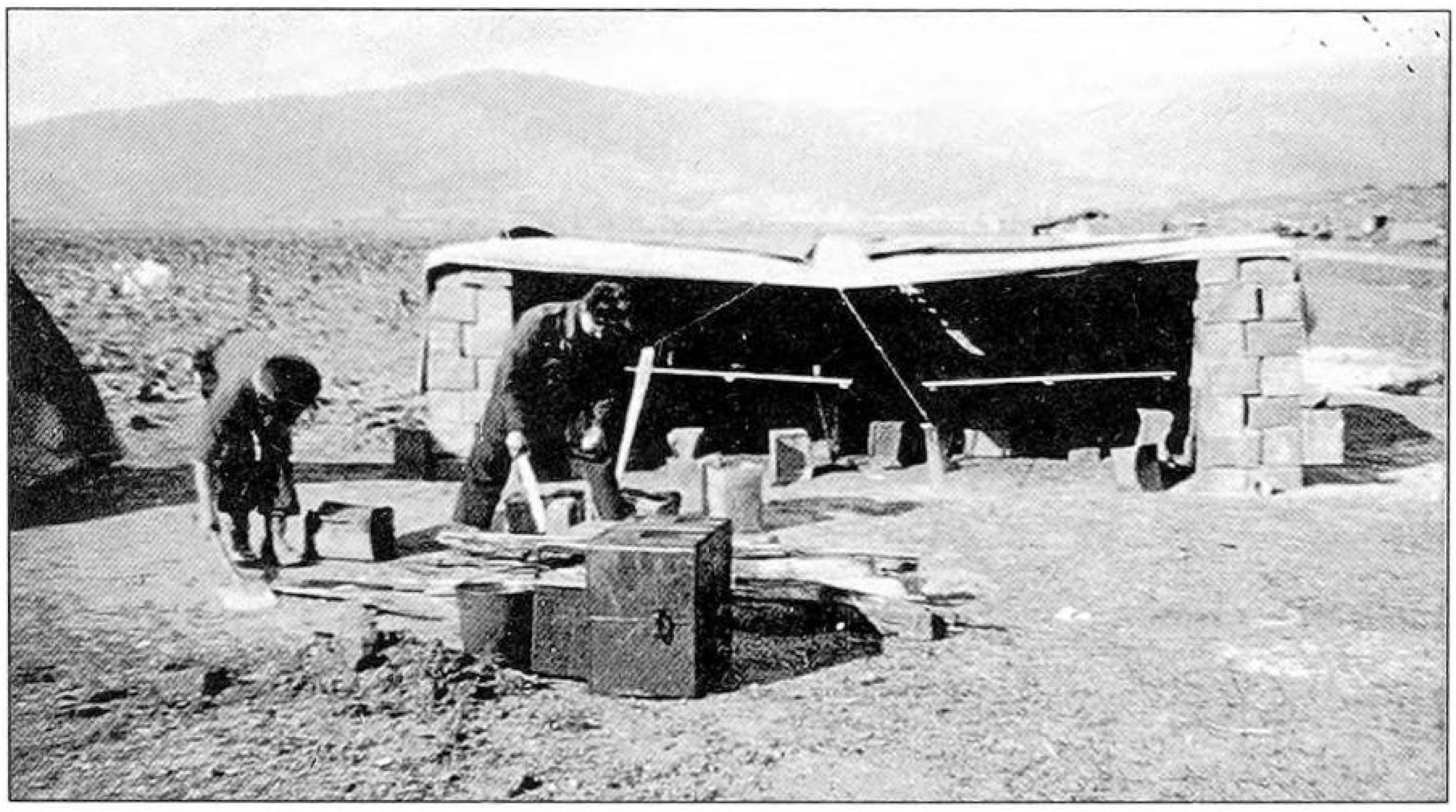
JK980 was a lightened and finely-tuned Spitfire F.IXC rebuilt by the RAF maintenance unit at Aboukir in Egypt, 1944.

items such as fountain pens and old watches. The airfield ground staff employed bulldozers to fill in the bomb craters each morning as required.

Squadron Leader Colin Gray replaced 'Razz' Berry on 24 January 1943.

Peart and his fellow pilots' only rest was infrequent three day periods at rest centres on the coast, back from the front lines, where they would be able to relax on the beach and generally laze about before rejoining the fray.

He scored his second victory, destroying a Bf 109G on 23 April flying Spitfire Mk IX EN138 'FL-E'.



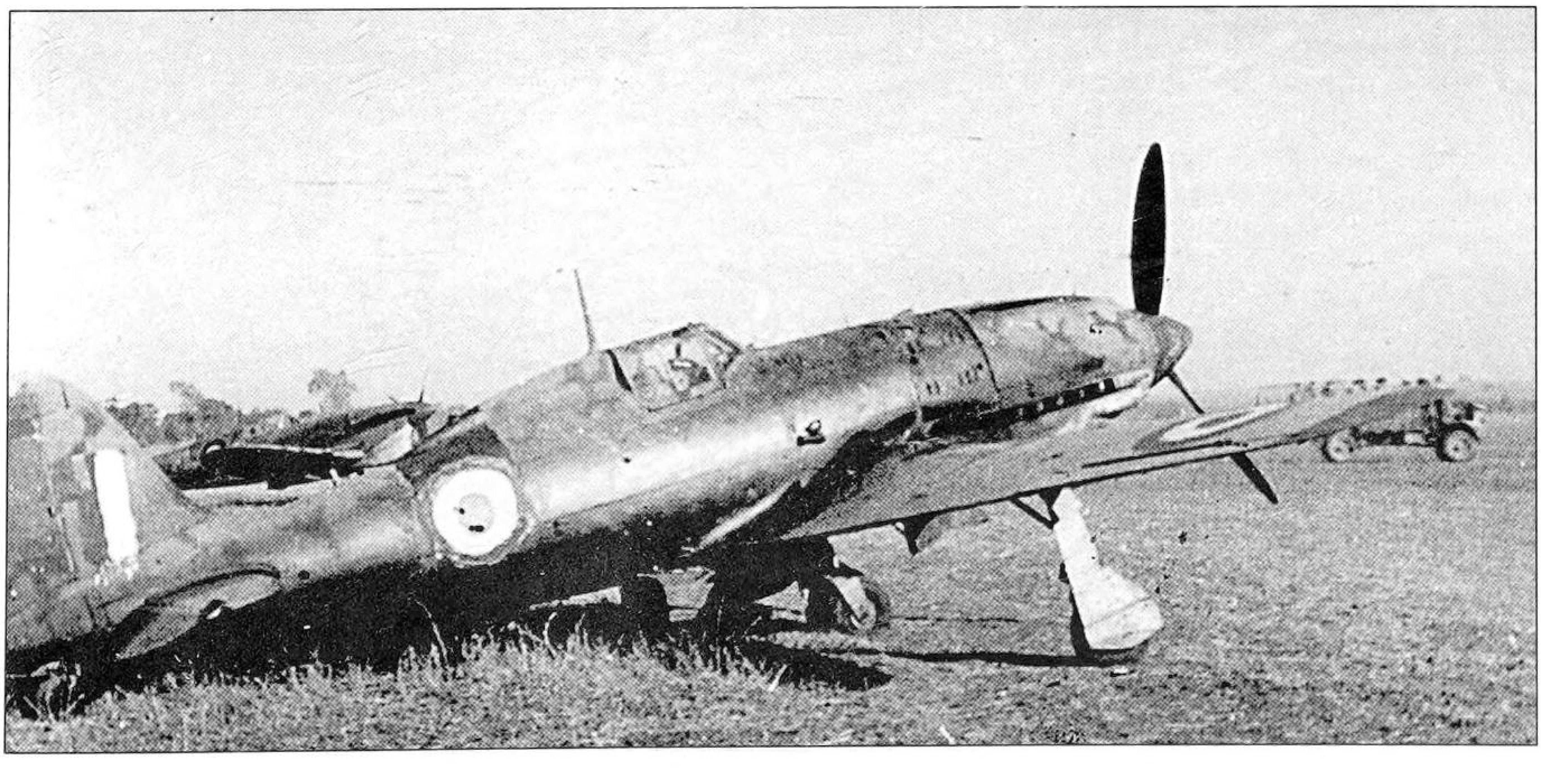
Conditions for No.81 Squadron in North Africa were primitive and by no means did the Allied Air Forces enjoy air superiority until the closing days of the campaign. At one stage this dug-out was the Squadron's 'Mess Tent'. (A Peart)

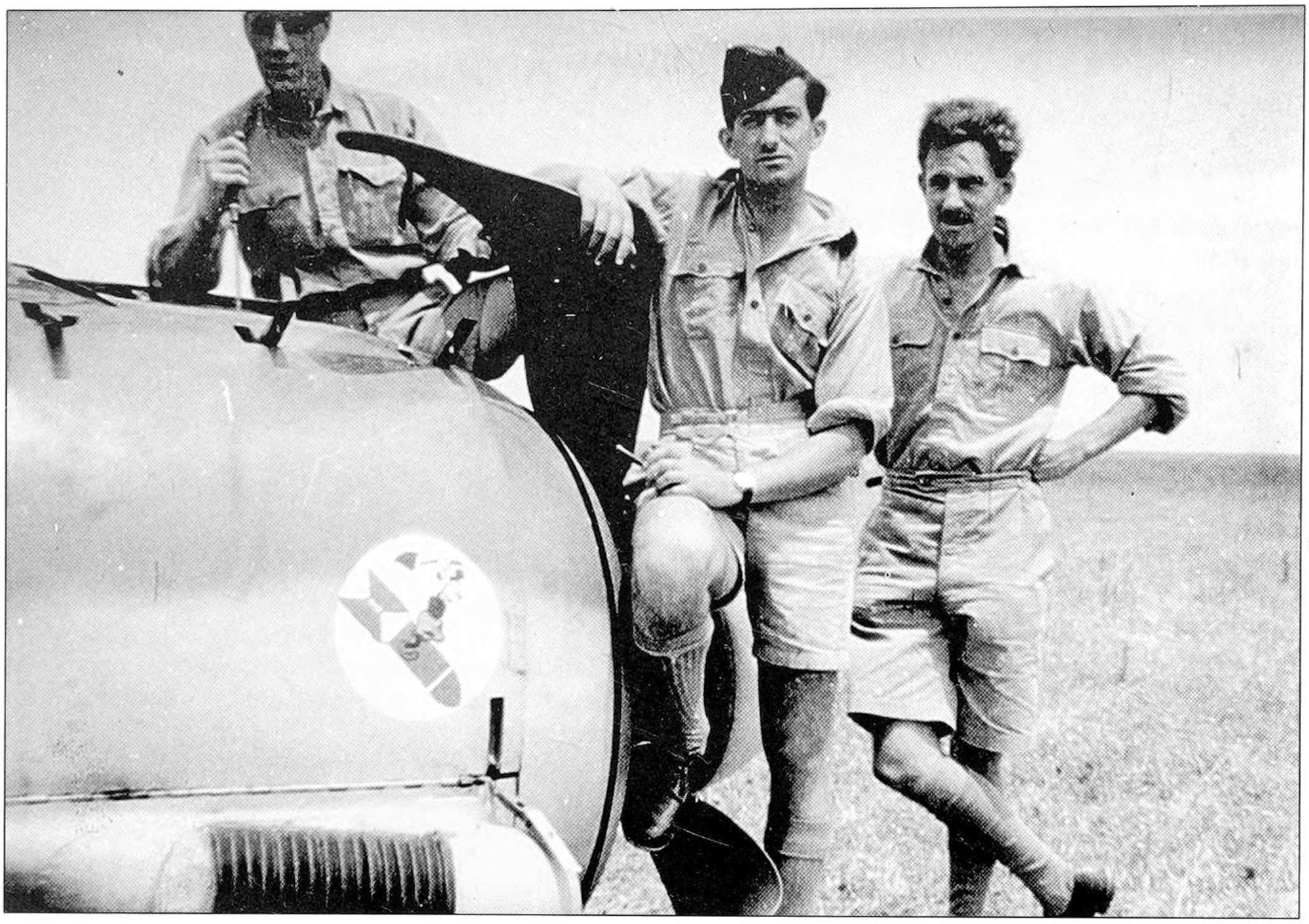
SECOND-HAND CANNONS

"I'd like to comment on another aspect of the North African campaign from the fighter pilot's point of view. We had a lot of problems with cannons jamming and if one jammed the recoil from the other one would push the Spitfire out of alignment, so you couldn't shoot straight. This left you with four machine guns which were not terribly useful against a 109 unless you got a bit lucky. On one occasion – having suffered a cannon jam – I got a good bounce on a 109. I could see my machine gun fire hitting him, my incendiary bullets were apparently bouncing off! I think his armour protected him and while I obviously did some damage to the skin of his aircraft I certainly didn't knock it down.

"They brought scientists, nicknamed 'Boffins' in the RAF, to talk to us, and other squadrons, about the cannon stoppages... all we pilots were very angry about being armed with what turned out to be second hand cannons, castoffs from Britain and left the 'Boffins' in no doubt as to our feelings! We asked for .5s (American $^1/_2$ inch Browning machine guns). Well, this problem was rectified and the cannons were a marvellous weapon from then on."

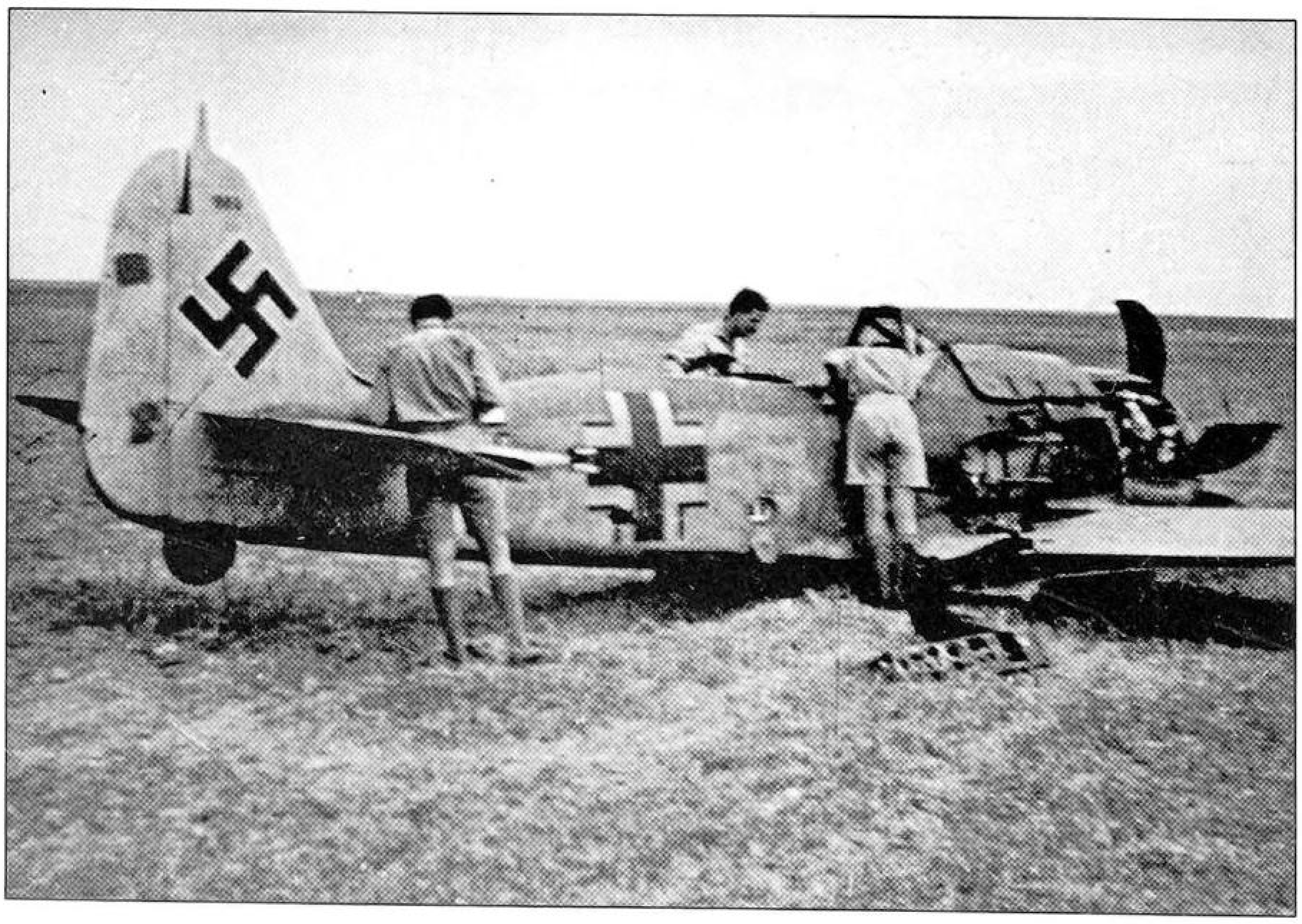
Peart flew this Macchi MC202, on 15 August 1943. He felt it was a pleasant aircraft to fly – a well balanced fighter which should have done better against the RAF. Most pilots in the Squadron tried the Macchi, which was later presented as a trophy to the Maltese people. He and other pilots also used a captured Italian Breda 39 trainer to give ground crew members joy-rides. The Italians also booby trapped their abandoned aircraft, with acid on the internal airframe being one subtle method. (B Gray)





Above and below. A crashed Fw 190 being examined by, from the left, (unknown), W (Bill) Young (Aust.) and Sergeant Pilot Major (UK). Note this aircraft's German-style tropical air intake with a side-entry dust filter for ground running.

As the Army advanced in Sicily, Alan Peart and his comrades were able to examine many captured aircraft, but found most weren't flyable. Those that were, were often booby trapped. For example, by wiring the guns to fire when the engine starter button was pressed, placing small bombs behind removable panels, or by removing most wing mounting bolts so that the wings would fail in flight. (A Peart)



The Squadron then moved to Malta on 4 June 1943 in preparation for the invasion of Sicily. Malta was extremely crowded with all types of aircraft building up for the invasion of Sicily. No.81 Squadron's activity consisted of various probing sorties over Sicily. During this period on Malta the Squadron was forced to exchange half its Spitfire Mk IXs for Mk Vs with another Squadron. On escort missions the Mk IXs would fly above the Mk Vs to protect them while the Mk Vs were closer to the bombers and supposed to keep an eye on the Mk IXs. This arrangement was less than ideal. On one bomber escort mission Peart enjoyed an extraordinary piece of luck. He and the other section leader that day, a Rhodesian named McGuire, were in the Mk IX equipped top cover.

"Suddenly a 109 appeared, right by my wing-tip. He'd got the perfect 'bounce' and I should have been dead... I felt as if I were part of a cinema film. I distinctly remember the pilot wearing his oxygen mask glaring at me. He then pulled back on his stick and climbed out of range... McGuire pulled up, he took a 90° deflection shot and caught the Bf 109 fair in the cockpit. It was a wonderful shot and so this 109 pilot did not survive his attack on me."

SICILY

No.81 Squadron provided top cover for the invasion of Sicily and moved to the Island on 19 July 1943. 'Babe' Whitamore was now in command of the Squadron, Gray having been promoted to Wing Commander (Flying) 322 Wing. While on Sicily both Whitamore and Peart celebrated their 21st birthdays. The operational environment was again intensive with the allies enjoying only a partial degree of air superiority. Peart's score against the enemy was mounting with his third 'kill' a Bf 109 on 28 August 1943 flying Spitfire Mk IXc 'FL-J', serial EN513, while escorting a bomber raid over the Mediterranean.

On one occasion the *Luftwaffe* attacked 81's Lentini airfield at night. First they dropped parachute flares to light the area, then anti-personnel bombs followed by high explosive ones. The initial attack killed a man immediately beside Peart and blew Peart off his feet.

"My instant reaction was to dive into our dispersal dugout, which was basically a hole in the ground. I landed square on a pair of feet which straightened and ejected me back out! I then remembered a small slit trench that we had dug out of the hard ground nearby and found not a soul in it, I dived in... meanwhile more bombs were going off and a lot of damage was being done... suddenly there was a 'thud' as somebody landed on top of me. I felt even safer, being covered on top, then there was another 'thud' and a third person arrived. This chap had lost a finger to shrapnel and started complaining that his backside was exposed. He began slithering down the side of the trench and eventually wriggled right under me. I was now number two in the trench and of course the chap on top of me was now exposed, so he too burrowed down leaving me exposed. I felt most aggrieved as I had been there first, so I in turn burrowed under the bottom fellow. So this went on with each of us complaining and swearing at the others.

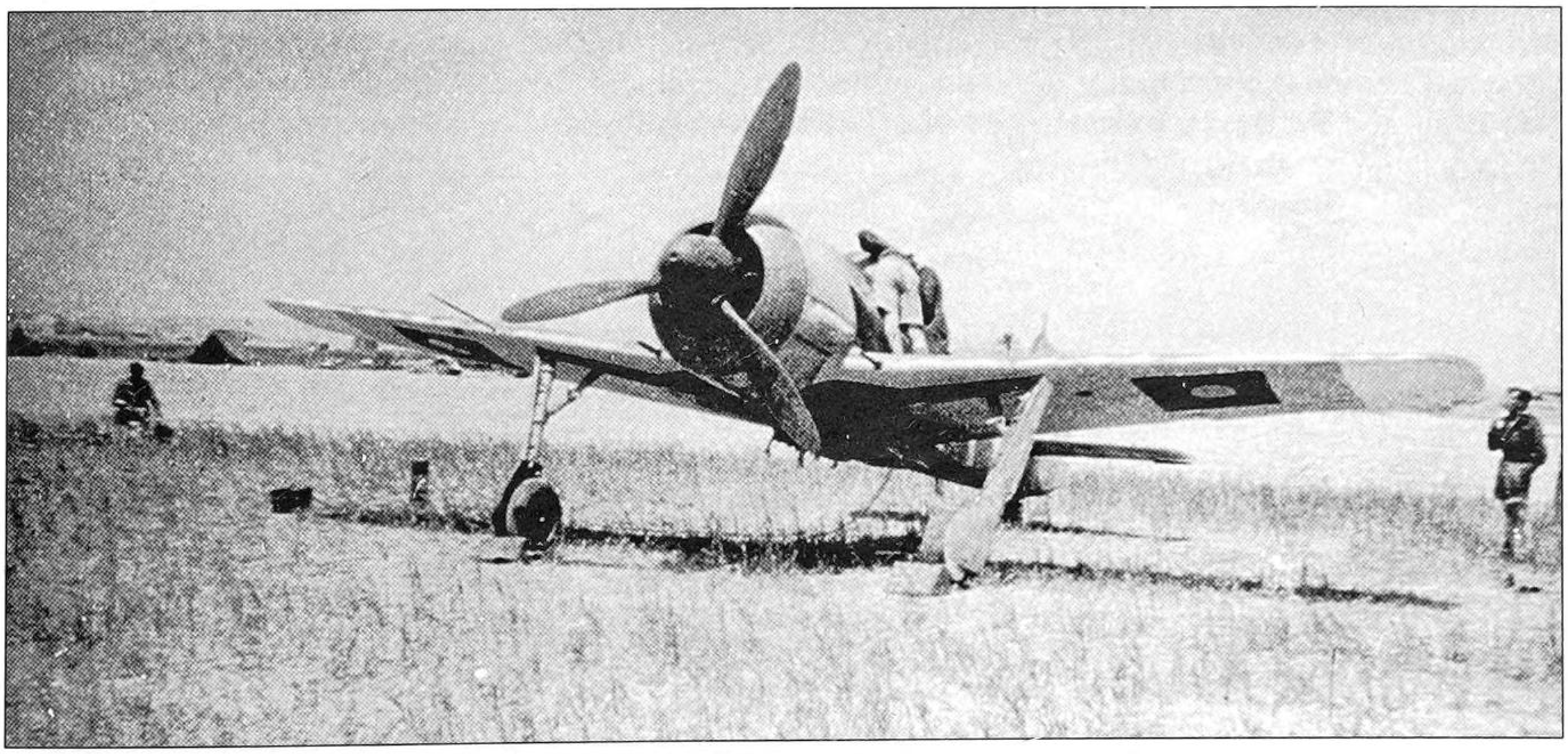
"When the bombing stopped the airfield was like Dante's Inferno... aeroplanes and tanks on fire, smoke columns rising, flares drifting down... Every one of our Spitfires was destroyed, we lost men too. It was a very successful raid by the Germans."

However, the Allies advance continued with their sheer volume of resources.

"The next day I discovered an unexploded anti-personnel bomb embedded in the side of the trench I had sheltered in – one of many occasions when luck, or perhaps divine intervention, saved me."

FRITZ-X RADIO GUIDED BOMBS

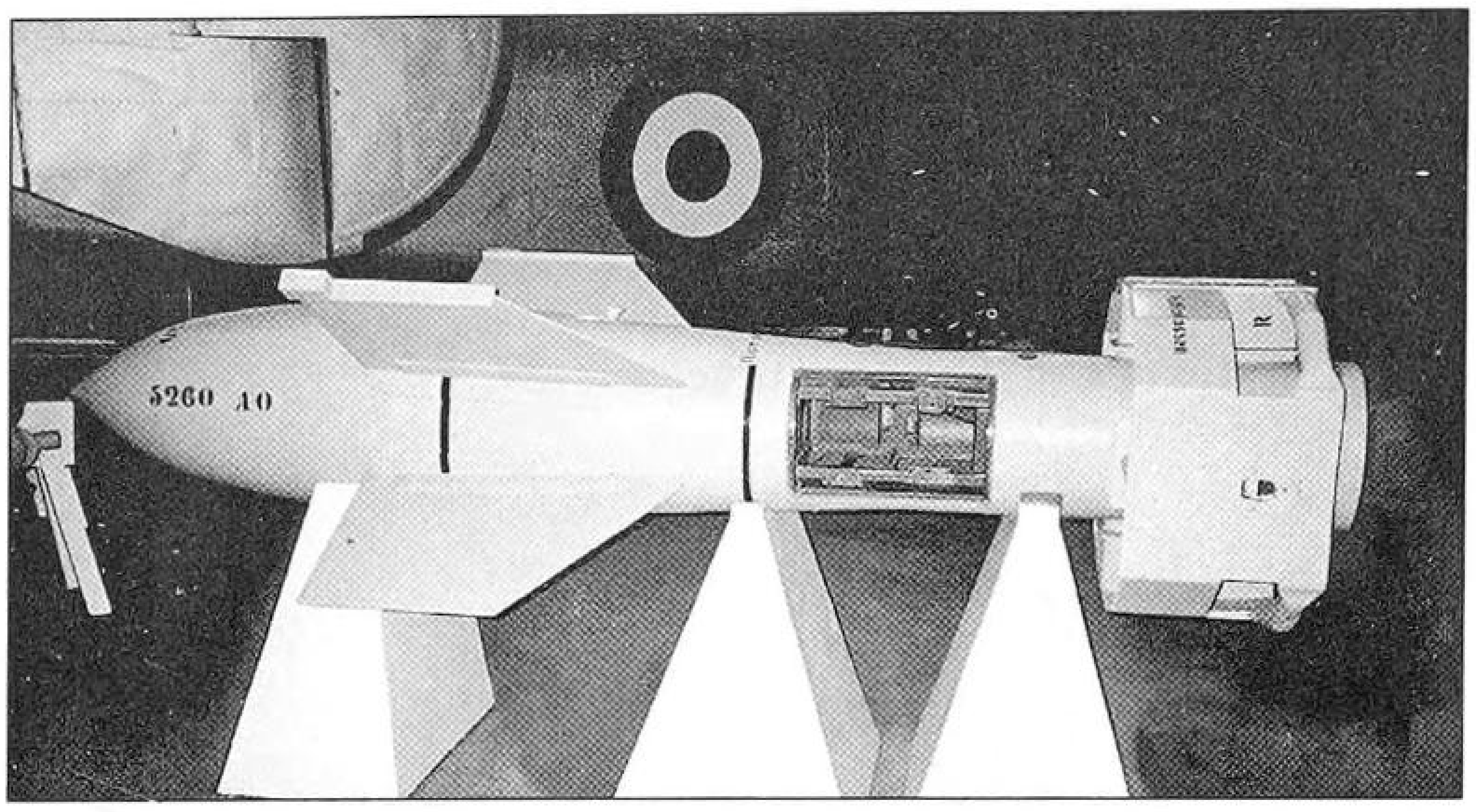
Peart shared in the destruction of a Dornier Do 217K in unusual circumstances north of the Salerno beachhead on 13 September 1943. The scene over Salerno was one of huge numbers of American and RAF fighters patrolling at various altitudes. Confusion sometimes reigned with Allied ships in the bay firing at friendly aircraft – tense and trigger-happy with not a *Luftwaffe* aircraft in sight. Peart was leading a



A Fw 190 previously of Sch. G 2, captured at one of the Catanian satellite airfields. Its German crosses have been painted out with dark squares and the centre red disc of an RAF roundel has already been added. This particular aircraft was never test flown. (A Peart) flight of six Spitfires flying top cover when they observed far below, the battleship HMS *Warspite* apparently hit by a torpedo, but no enemy bombers were in sight.

"We looked around for a different cause and sighted three Dornier Do 217s making their escape north up the coast."

Some weeks later, from intelligence briefings, they realized that they had witnessed an early use of the German 'Fritz-X' radio guided winged bomb. The Dorniers had successfully launched their weapons at a distance and guided them onto the battleship undetected.


A preserved Fritx-X at the British Imperial War Museum. (R Wallsgrove)

Peart split his small force with one pair catching and destroying one of the Dorniers while Peart, Bill Fell and their respective No.2s pursued the other two German aircraft. Bill Fell made an immediate attack on one from the rear quarter and was promptly shot down by its gunners. Peart and the other two pilots made a more careful attack.

"I saw pieces come off its port wing but could see no result from the others. My next attack caused a large piece to detach and I flew right into it! There was a loud bang but I seemed to be alright."

The three chased the Dornier and saw it crash-land on a scrub covered hillside.

"I flew over the downed aircraft and although I could see no signs of life, the crew probably did survive. I felt it was a fine effort by these three German crews and wished them luck to survive following such a brave and audacious attack."

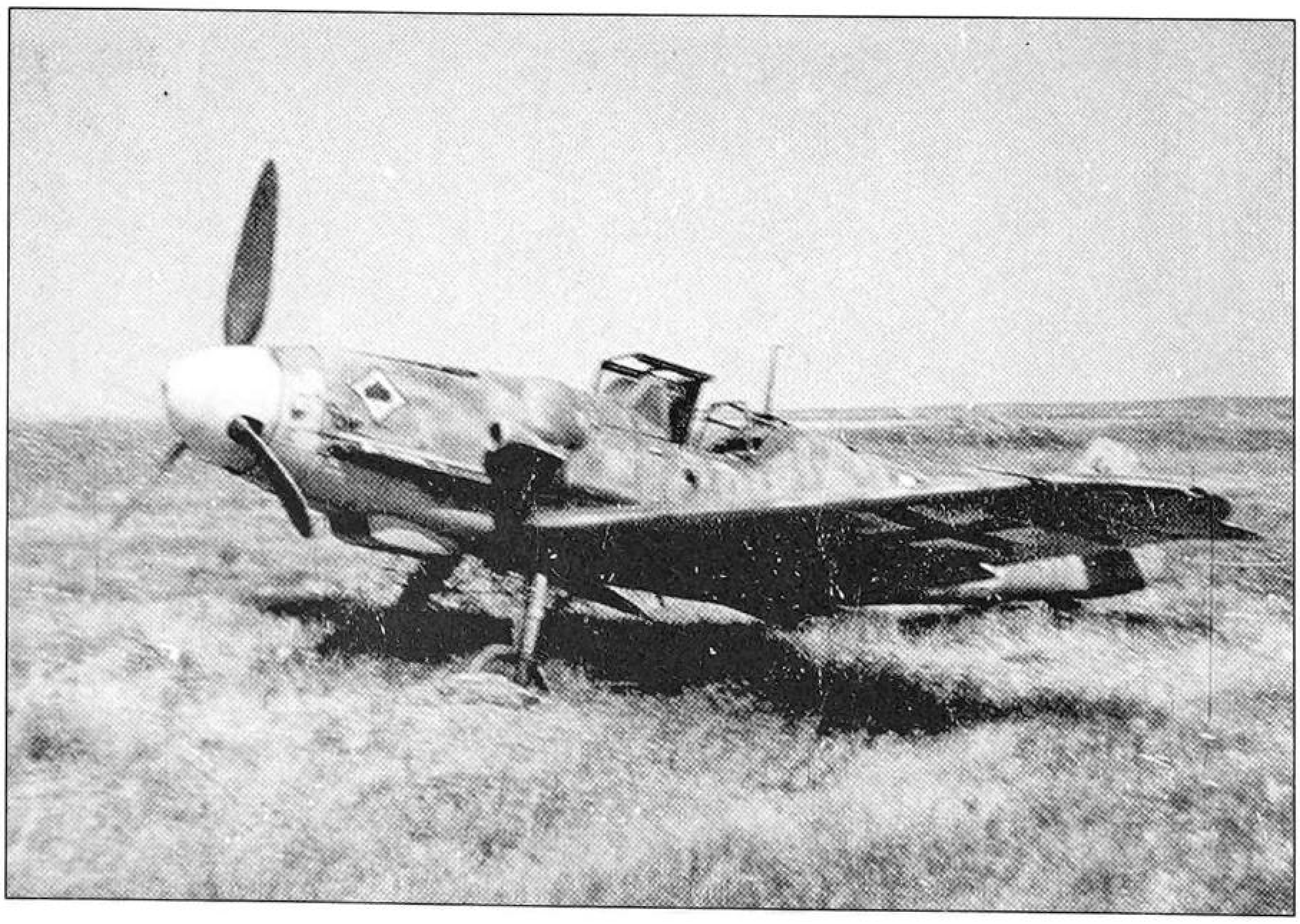
The third Dornier made good its escape and Peart later 'shared' the Dornier destroyed claim with his two fellow pilots.

"They were new and I thought it would be good for their morale!"

At this point it became evident that his own aircraft had been damaged in the attack as his engine began overheating. All three were also so short of fuel that they could not make their base at Millazo. Peart ordered that all three would land at the rough emergency strip on the beachhead which was being used to ferry in supplies and evacuate wounded. As he touched down in the swirling, blinding dust he almost crashed into another Spitfire, New Zealander, Pat Ryan's. It had been an expensive day with only one of the six Spitfires involved in the mission eventually returning to base as two more collided with each other taking off from Salerno the next day – one of the pilots being killed. Peart himself hitched a ride out of Salerno in a C-47 transport.

"We had to take off straight over the German lines and my respect for the C-47 supply pilots rose enormously as the strip at Salerno was a pilots' nightmare"

Intensive operations over Italy were followed by a bout of malaria and Peart was kept back at a recovery hospital in Catania, Sicily, while his comrades moved forward to Italy.


This Jagdgeschwader 53 (JG 53) Bf 109G was found abandoned in Sicily. JG 53's 'Pik-As' (Ace of Spades) symbol was 'souvenired' by 81 Squadron as they had often fought against this Luftwaffe Group, with considerable success, in North Africa and Sicily. The Ace of Spades was painted on the port nose of No.81's Spitfire Mk VIIIs in India. (A Peart)

ON TO BURMA

A group of pilots at the Ranui 1 landing ground. Conditions were hot and steamy, hence the pilots' dress. From the left, Alan Peart, Lou Everest (UK), Larry Cronin (Australia) and Captain 'Shanks' McLean (South Africa). (A Peart)

Suddenly No.81 was given new orders. On 24 November 1943 the pilots received orders to leave their aircraft and ground crew behind and were shipped out to Cairo, Egypt. There they re-equipped with Spitfire Mk VIIIs, the ultimate Merlin powered Spitfire interceptor. Alan Peart was by now a seasoned fighter pilot, his Squadron possessed the best fighter aircraft in the British overseas arsenal and they were to rush to India to wrest control of the air from the Japanese once and for all.

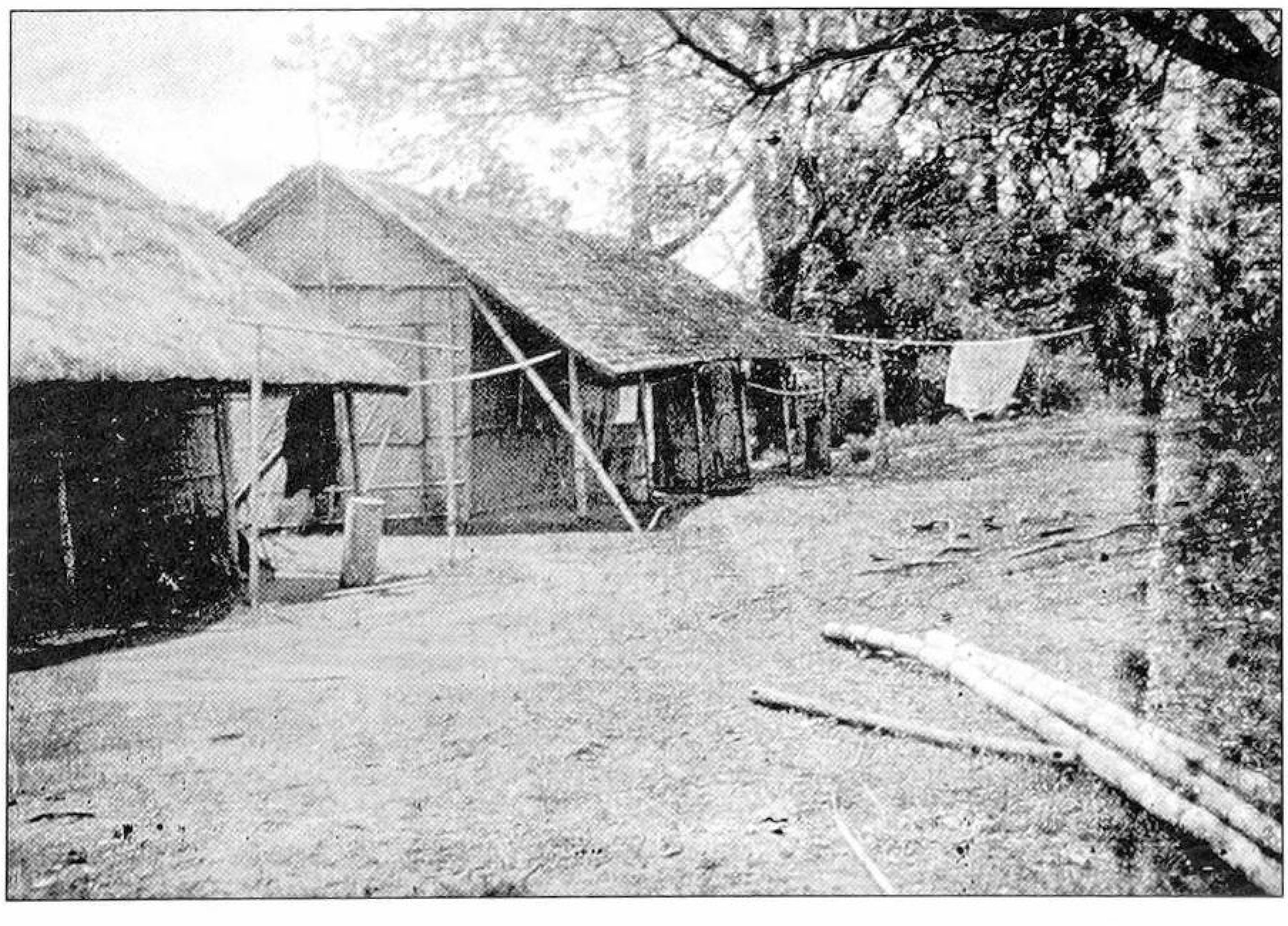
On 25 November the Squadron set out on the five-day staged ferry flight via the Persian gulf states to Karachi where much to their amazement work continued at a peacetime pace. The desperately needed Spitfires were slowly re-camouflaged in dark green and chocolate brown (Peart recalls this brown as being quite different from the 'Dark Earth' colour used in Europe) upper surfaces with light blue lower surfaces, at the rate of one every three days. The regular RAF personnel stopped for long lunches, Officers dressed for dinner and no one worked on the weekends! The pilots from the European War were flabbergasted!

Fortunately, a change occurred when Mountbatten was given command of the Army and General Wavell appointed Viceroy. The Spitfires were re-camouflaged within days and the Squadron moved forward to Calcutta... where it sat with fuel but no allocation of ammunition! The Japanese were mounting air raids on Calcutta, but military bureaucracy kept the very best fighter available on the ground and their pilots spectators. Instead the Mk VIIIs were introduced to the public with such exercises as a Squadron fly-past over Calcutta race course. One aircraft, flown by Flying Officer Larry Cronin, was detailed to impress the civilian audience by making a very high speed pass by diving and levelling out over the track at 520 mph. One presumes the locals were impressed, but this did nothing to defeat the Japanese.

No.81 Squadron moved forward to the front line in January 1944 with Peart's flying log recording his arrival at Imphal on 5 January 1944.

"At that time of year in winter the days were absolutely perfect, clear days, very cold at night, frosts in the morning. We lived in bamboo 'basha' huts and froze that first night in our tropical clothing. I recall the native Maniapoui people being most friendly. In February things began to warm up, literally and figuratively."

No.81 Squadron's living quarters at Kanglatombe, straw and cane 'basha' huts. (A Peart)



The Japanese launched their last attempt to invade India, through the Arakan, on 4 February 1944, and from the 9th onward Peart's log records an increasing level of activity, with air superiority the purpose of the Squadron's tasks. They flew in each day to temporary forward landing strips – generally dried and flattened paddy fields with no facilities – operated there during daylight hours and returning to Imphal at dusk. Peart's log records 17 flights in February increasing to 42 in March.

FIRST ENGAGEMENT WITH JAPANESE FIGHTERS

"When we approached this particular group of Japanese fighters they formed themselves into a large circle, with each protecting the one in front. However we did not attempt to dog fight and used our dive-attack-pull up tactics. We caused considerable damage and claimed quite a few 'damaged', many of which were later confirmed destroyed by the Army. This did expose a weakness in our Mk VIIIs which, at the time, were equipped with pointed (long span) wing-tips. I had to pull out very rapidly with a Jap on my tail having made an attack which must have overstressed the aeroplane, because following this sortie we found tail rivets had sprung, the wings had extra dihedral and my radio had been dislodged from its mounting brackets.

"The ground crew accused me of making a heavy landing, which did nothing for my sense of humour! Other aircraft had similar problems and so the pointed wing-tips were replaced with standard elliptical ones and we had no further trouble along those lines."

About two weeks into the campaign the Spitfire squadrons and especially No.81 with its Mk VIIIs, had established a measure of air superiority over the Japanese Army Air Force and never lost it. Peart destroyed a Ki43 'Oscar' on 16 March, having flown into Kanglatombe from their base at Imphal for the day. He recalls one occasion where he saw a temporary forward strip the Squadron was flying from, shelled.

"It was minor compared with what we had endured from the Germans in North Africa, Sicily or Italy and this time, we watched from a safe vantage point."

The Air Force fought on, supporting the Army with ground attack and bomber and transport escort work. The British 14th Army eventually became surrounded in the Imphal Valley and was supplied entirely from the air by British and American C-46s and C-47s.

BROADWAY

It was decided by the Allied commanders that each day six aircraft from No.81 Squadron would fly 200 miles into the Imphal valley to a temporary landing strip, code named Broadway, just north of Myitkyina in a bend in the Irrawaddy river. It was merely a clearing in dense jungle

No.81 Squadron pilots in Ceylon about September 1944.
Left to right: top row, Flying Officer Everest (UK), Pilot Officer Hayes (UK), middle row, Pilot Officer Swan (NZ), Flight Lieutenant Peart (NZ), Flying Officer Robinson (NZ), bottom row, two unidentified Sergeant Pilots, Lt Gasson (S. Africa). (A Peart)

with a swamp at one end and tall trees at the other. The Squadron was to fly aircraft in at dawn, operate as required until dusk and return to Kanglatombe.

"The place was strewn with wrecked gliders (in which Wingate's Chindits had landed), debris of all sorts, some strip making equipment, it looked like a real battle field. We were based there with the idea of defending the strip against Japanese air attacks 200 miles behind enemy lines.

"Remember the Spitfire was a short range defensive fighter and very good at that but we had nowhere else to land (if things went wrong). This lack of endurance was a problem which meant that it was possible for the enemy to force us up to engage them and stick around until they could bring more fighters into play and we were out of fuel and had to land. Of course they would still be there; we became totally vulnerable. We lost a number of pilots there for that very reason, although we had some victories as well."

The Squadron's worst and final day (at Broadway) was 17 March 1944. Six Spitfires flew in at dawn led by Squadron Leader W M 'Babe' Whitamore. Five were serviceable, one having been damaged on landing. As the dawn brightened the pilots were given breakfast as usual and waited near their aircraft for Broadway's small primitive radar set to warn of enemy aircraft approaching. A contact was made, estimated at four enemy fighters. Whitamore had to decide how many of his small force to scramble, knowing that these four could be the vanguard of a larger formation. He delayed as long as he dared and decided that just himself and Peart would intercept, leaving the others in reserve. The two were just at the point of takeoff – totally vulnerable – when four Ki43 'Oscars' appeared overhead and made a strafing run at the Spitfires. Whitamore and Peart struggled for air speed.

"I remember Whitamore hauling his machine off the ground with emergency boost, I did the same, we had to do a crazy manoeuvre, a kind of stall turn off the ground to try and get in behind (the Ki43s) to stop their strafing run... I don't think we were very successful."

The pair clawed for height as another force of about 24 Ki43s arrived over the horizon. Whitamore shot down one Ki43 before being shot down himself and killed. Peart was about 400 metres away to one side. He saw Whitamore's aircraft hit but had his own problems! Peart was alone in the sky with 24 plus enemy fighters

A 'BLIND' NIGHT LANDING...

"Another occasion which brought home to me what I thought was a very relaxed attitude to our welfare was an occasion when I led a patrol of six Spitfires on a convoy patrol. It must have been a very important convoy to the hierarchy! We were operating from Reindeer 1 in the Arakan and as dusk fell we were running short of fuel. Being leader I called control and requested permission to be released, the reply, 'remain on station'.

After a while I reported that we were very low on fuel, it was getting dark and we had no night flying facilities. The order was repeated, 'remain on station!'

It was completely dark when we were finally released and I had no idea how we would get down onto our strip. I headed inland in the direction I thought Reindeer 1 would be at 2000 ft pondering what was best to do, possibly bail out over the paddy fields and destroy the six Spitfires we had recently ferried, at great effort, from Cairo – all on the whim of somebody who decided an extra 15 minutes of patrol was more important than us, or our aircraft.

However, to my great surprise I saw some Very Lights (flares) being fired in the darkness ahead of us. There was no radio communication (with Reindeer 1) and I decided that here was somebody on the airstrip trying to guide us down. With no radio communication I had to guess that this person was standing roughly where he wanted us to land and would be firing the Very Lights in the direction in which we should land. How we used that information? ... well!... I told the others to remain aloft while I did a night let-down on instruments until I hit the ground. I landed quite hard and bounced high, however by applying immediate power and stick forward I avoided stalling and was able to touch down more smoothly. Of course, in the darkness I hadn't known exactly where the ground was. With a combination of control movements and braking as hard as I dared, hoping there was nothing in the way, I managed to keep straight by watching my instruments. I stopped, then taxied left... here was a vehicle with just little slits for headlights – this was a forward area and Japanese intruders could attack. A chap with a torch waved me in. These few people, on their own initiative, had decided to help."

Alan Peart used his aircraft radio to guide the others in and only one Spitfire was damaged on landing.

"They were very mean with awards and medals etc in India and I felt that the unknown man who had guided the Flight in to land should have been recognised and decorated, but nothing happened."

to deal with. He flew and fought just to survive for the next 40 minutes claiming one Ki43 destroyed.

"At the end of it I was so exhausted I was just looking for a place to crash-land, rather than let myself be shot down; there was nowhere else for me to go... I could hardly move I was so exhausted. Suddenly there weren't any Jap fighters, they'd gone!"

Peart landed and found Broadway strewn with burning aircraft.

"All our other Spitfires were destroyed and one of the pilots was killed. My aircraft was a write off, with broken engine mounts, tail rivets sprung and extra wing dihedral. Also, a cannon shell had exploded under the pilot's seat. Like us, the Japanese fired alternating high explosive and armour piercing rounds; had I been hit by the round before or after it would have penetrated my seat with obvious results...

"I was a bit 'nervy' and went for a walk in the jungle (to calm down). I was a bit rude to a Brigadier - Calvert, I think. Fortunately this Spitfire was still flyable and so I had it refuelled and flew back to Kanglatombe."

Peart was spoken to by the Air Officer Commanding (Air Vice Marshal Vincent) and No.81 Squadron flew no more detachments to Broadway – it was too exposed. Alan Peart was subsequently decorated with the Distinguished Flying Cross for his action against the far stronger Japanese force that day.

The Imphal Valley became completely surrounded by the Japanese army and 81 Squadron was transferred to a safer base at Khumbhirgram where its tasks were to escort supply aircraft in and out of the valley and carry out offensive and defensive patrols.

On one occasion Peart and his No.2 were patrolling the 'corridor' along which the supply aircraft flew when they were vectored onto a 'Bogey' which proved to be an American B-25 Mitchell bomber. They moved in close enough so that the B-25 crew could identify them and be aware that two Spitfires were escorting them. However as they approached, the B-25s gunners opened fire.

"I remember remarking to my No.2 'look out, we'd better keep clear, the bastards are shooting at us!' That was all I said. We pulled back and reported that the 'Bogey' was a Mitchell, but apparently that (radio) comment was picked up and recorded (in official records) I noticed it written in a book recently, but not sourced to me! I was interested to read that the B-25 crew reported that they had been attacked by two Army type 01s (Ki43 'Oscars') and shot them both down!"

The pace of the air war did not slacken and Peart's log records 47 flights in April of which 24 were combat patrols. The Squadron's job was to patrol the air 'corridor' by which the Allies supplied the surrounded 14th Army in the valley. He claimed a Ki43 destroyed and two damaged on 17 April 1944 (post war Japanese records indicate that at least one of these Ki43s was destroyed). In the first two weeks of May, 22 flights are recorded in Peart's log, of which 20 were combat patrols or scrambles.

CENTRAL GUNNERY SCHOOL

At the end of the second week in May 1944 Alan Peart was posted to No.1 Air Fighting Training Unit at Amarda Road. This was one of only two such schools in the RAF at the time and Peart felt that it taught him skills that he should have been instructed in years earlier. The school was run by Wing Commander Chota Carrey, the leading Ace in India at that time and was equipped with Harvards and Hurricanes. In addition to receiving training in current air fighting ideas, Peart was assessed as an instructor and achieved an 'A' passing grade as an instructor and marksman. By the 20th of June he was back in action with No.81 Squadron.

With the battle now ever more in the Allies favour, 81's tasks tended more towards ground attack and armed reconnaissance patrols. Tame elephants and their Indian mahouts, trained for heavy work, had been captured and were being used to advantage by the Japanese. The Allied Air Forces initially had orders not to shoot them, because the Indian and British armies wanted to recapture the elephants to employ them themselves. Eventually, however, Command opinion was that the Japanese were gaining too much advantage using these elephants and orders were given to kill them from the

"WHAT YOU REALLY NEEDED TO SUCCEED AS A FIGHTER PILOT WAS ...

- Excellent eye sight and the ability to constantly scan the space around you. You had to learn the technique to quickly, smoothly and continuously re-focus your eyes from infinity to close-up and back again so as to really see anything in the air. An enemy fighter is a very small object in the distance.
- Knowledge of your enemy's capabilities, and your own.
- Concentration. You could not afford to relax. After the close-shave where McGuire shot down a Bf 109 which had 'bounced' me, I made it my business never to trust anyone else to cover me. I can recall, on occasions, being wet with perspiration from sheer concentration.
- Rapid reaction times, you had to be able to think while you acted and be unpredictable in combat.
- An absolute desire to survive. I think my survival at Broadway was a good example."

air. On 4 August 1944 Peart, with Pat Ryan as his No.2, did have to strafe and kill two elephants. Their Mahouts ran for cover as the two Spitfires bore down.

"I felt dreadful about this… I felt very sad…"

This turned out to be Alan Peart's last offensive sortie of the War and on 7 August the Squadron began moving back from the front for rest in Ceylon.

AIR COMBAT INSTRUCTOR

From there he was given command of 'C' Flight 3 RFU, Poona, India where he trained fighter pilots, passing on his knowledge and experience to others – training them on Spitfire Mk VIIIs to continue the battle against the Japanese, though with the Allies now clearly in the ascendancy.

MEMORIES OF THE JUNGLE

Memories which stuck in his mind of India include how uniforms just rotted off his back and seeing big cats such as leopards and panthers.

"Generally they were not aggressive and we just left each other alone."

Alan Peart suffered again from dysentery, one of the all too numerous tropical illnesses affecting service personnel in the Far East. Like many he had also experienced dengue fever and jungle ulcers at various times.

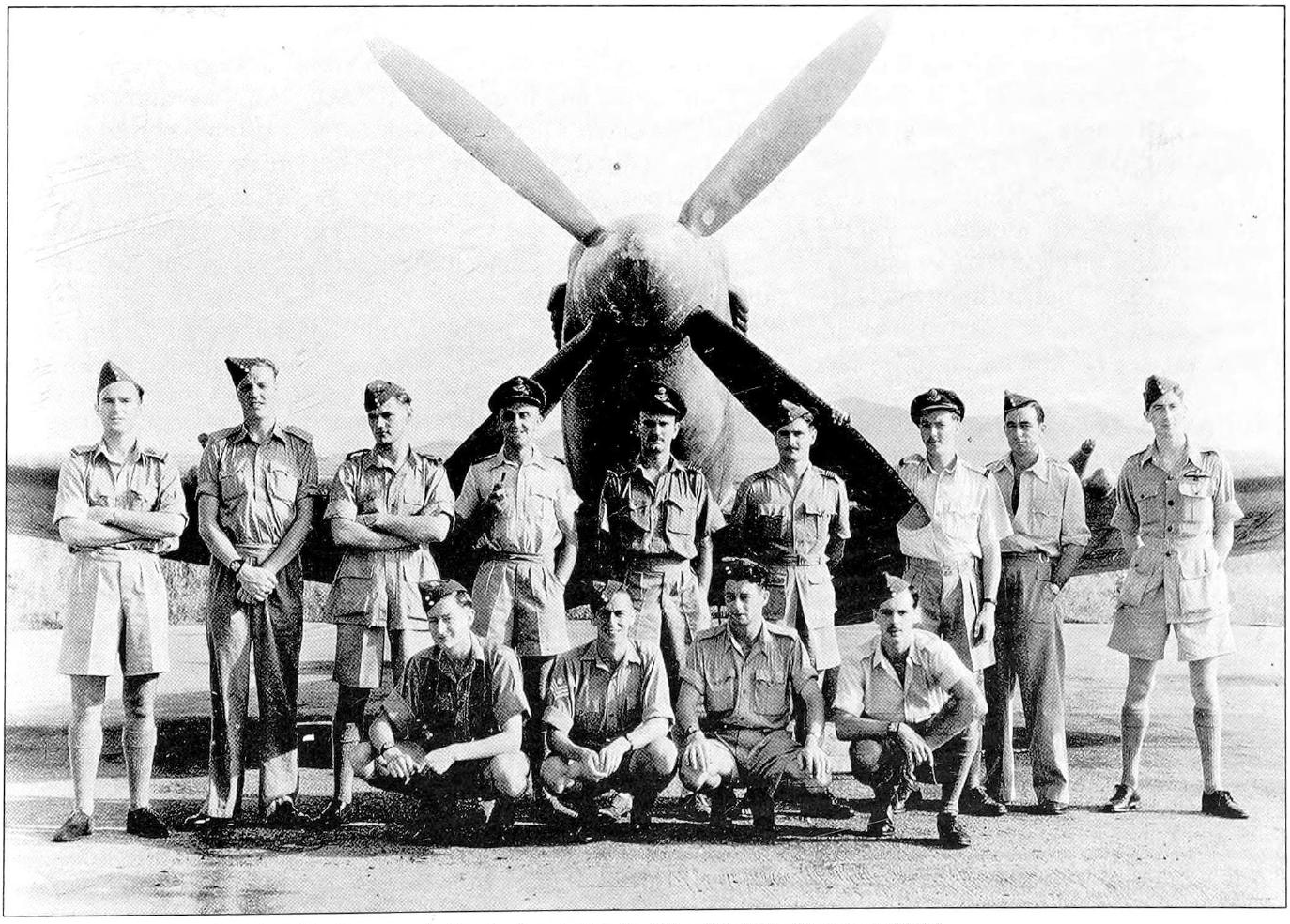
HOME TO NEW ZEALAND

Early in 1945 when Peart suffered another bout of dysentery he received a posting home to New Zealand. He travelled while still ill, his weight down to eight stone, by ship from Bombay to Auckland and finally home to Raglan.

For all his time in India Peart had not received his full official pay and existed on a special allowance given to those serving in the Far East. He applied for the missing money and duly received £700, a fortune in those days!

Now a Flight Lieutenant he qualified as a flying instructor with the RNZAF, with his log book recording his last flight as a serving officer on 20 August 1945 in Harvard 1069 doing instrument flying instruction with a Flight Lieutenant Betteridge.

In civilian life, post war, Alan Peart completed an Engineering degree at Auckland University College, married Jennifer Kensington and they raised a family of three. He retired as District Commissioner of Works for the Wellington region and now lives in Hamilton, New Zealand.



Instructors at No.3 RFU, RAF, Poona, India, in front of a Spitfire Mk VIII, October 1944.
Alan Peart is fourth from the right, back row. (A Peart)

FLIGHT LIEUTENANT S L E WEGGERY, RNZAF

“Like many young New Zealanders, at the age of 18, when war was declared in 1939 I wanted to be involved in this great adventure. Our greatest fear was that it would be over before we were old enough to go! My mother was quite adamant that I had to be another year older before my parents would sign the necessary papers. My one ambition was to fly in the Air Force.

“By June 1940 my parents agreed to sign the papers to allow me to enlist. At one stage I recall seeing a newspaper billboard at Wellington Railway station about ‘Cobber’ Kain and his exploits over France. To us kids, 18 and 19 years old, he was *the* ace pilot. However, the day after I enlisted I stepped out onto Wellington railway station to read that ‘Cobber’ Kain had been killed. That rather shook us – to realise that this was something serious that we were getting involved in.”

The enlistment process to gain acceptance for aircrew training at that time was extremely rigorous as so many young men wanted to be pilots. Weggery succeeded and in early January 1941 was ordered to report to GTS Weraroa near Levin. Thereafter he passed through the New Zealand and Canada based aircrew training system and eventually, while waiting for an operational posting in England volunteered to serve in India against the Japanese.

“Anywhere that was warmer and had more food than England sounded good! As it turned out, between flying Harvards in Canada (October 1941) and the old ex-Battle of Britain Hurricane Mk Is we converted to in India, I never sat in a cockpit for an entire year!”

A press photo showing the three pilots responsible for shooting down the first two Mitsubishi Ki46 reconnaissance aircraft shot down over East Bengal. From the left, Sergeant W ‘Bill’ Hyde (UK), Flight Lieutenant Paul Louis (UK) and Flying Officer Lawrence Weggery. This photo was taken outside the pilots’ dispersal hut at Dohazari shortly after the Squadron moved there from Chittagong. (SLE Weggery)

HURRICANES IN INDIA

“It was a good year with the Hurricane and we dealt with the Japs (in aerial combat) by making high speed passes at their more manoeuvrable fighters and then going around again. The rule was never to dog-fight with the more nimble Ki43 ‘Oscars’. However, we were growing ever more conscious that we needed a more capable fighter.

“The reason we were given for not receiving Spitfires was that the temperatures in the tropics where we were operating were too high for the Spitfire. The Hurricane’s propeller blew cooling air through the radiator while you were on the ground. The Merlins on both the Hurricane and Spitfire were cooled with pure glycol which boiled at about 140° C and the engine would reach 120° C while sitting on the ground. The official line was that because the Spitfire Mk Vc’s radiator was under the starboard wing and did not receive any cooling prop wash, the engine could more easily overheat.”

SPITFIRES AT LAST

In May 1943, No.615 Squadron was pulled back from the Front to be stationed at Alipore airstrip, Calcutta. In October they at last received Spitfire Mk Vc (Trop)s.

"Finally they were so desperate for the Spitfire's greater performance that we were re-equipped with them during the 1943 monsoon season. Typically, from June or July flying became impossible from the forward fair weather airstrips, because the monsoon rains and cumulo-nimbus cloud over the Chinwin Hills meant you couldn't fly missions over those 'hills' against the Japanese. When you consider that the nearby Himalayan range reaches over 26,000 ft you can appreciate why local people referred to a 10,000 ft range as hills!"

Weggery's first test flight in a Spitfire was on 11 October 1943.

"I enjoyed a smooth powerful takeoff, much more 'kick in the back' than the old Hurricane. I flew around for a while then came in to land, lowered the wheels safely and everything was nice, I completed my slow curving approach to the runway (necessary so that the pilot could keep the runway in view to the side of the Spitfire's long nose, only at the last moment did he straighten up to touch down). Half way through this curve you were to put your flaps down. So, I selected flaps down at the correct time and my nose fell away so that I was looking at the ground! While the Hurricane was equipped with gradually operating hydraulic flaps, the Spitfires were pneumatic and snapped fully down in one motion. Later on I learned to re-trim the aircraft as I selected flaps down. However on that first flight no one told me about this. Unintentional I suppose, but it was a scare at the time.

"There were numerous taxiing accidents with the Spitfires, particularly when we first received them. One reason was that the *minimum* taxi speed was 40 mph, to achieve enough cooling air flow through the radiator and at the same time we would be weaving so as to see past the long nose. As you can imagine, on a dusty air strip with a number of aircraft taxiing a huge amount of dust was thrown up. Aircraft would touch wing-tips and spin around on their narrow undercarriage, that sort of thing."

Following a familiarisation period at Amardu Road aerodrome, Orissa, with their new Spitfires, No.615 was posted to Chittagong on 4 November 1943. Lawrence Weggery and his comrades were thrown back into battle. The months that followed were to be the Squadron's most successful in terms of combat success in the air. However, a steady toll of men and machines is also recorded in Weggery's Log Book.

"Both my Spitfires were named Verna June, the name of my sister, not that anyone believed me. They all thought it was the name of a girl friend. But seeing as I had put her name on the hatch my two ground crew Barkle (Rigger) and Bagnall (Fitter), who were both British, asked if each could paint the name of their wife or girl friend on the cannons. There was great superstition in the Squadron and no one else would allow a girl's name on their plane. But, I said yes and so they asked the Squadron signwriter to paint the names of these women on the cannon cowlings – from then on I had the best maintained cannons in the Squadron. The feeling was that whenever I had a stoppage in either cannon they would be 'on tenterhooks' waiting for the next letter from home to see whether their wife had ditched them or their girl friend had changed her mind."

With their new Spitfires, No.615 Squadron could finally meet the enemy on equal terms.

FIRST SPITFIRE VICTORIES OVER INDIA

On 8 November 1943, flying Spitfire Mk Vc MA349, coded 'KW-D' and named 'Verna June', Flying Officer Weggery and Flight Lieutenant Paul Louis shared in the destruction of a Mitsubishi Ki46 reconnaissance aircraft (Allied code name 'Dinah'). *This was the first 'kill' in a Spitfire over the India/Burma front.*

Two days later Sergeant Bill Hyde shot down a second one and on 17 November Flying Officer Kevin Gannon a third. At last the Allies had the upper hand against these capable Japanese reconnaissance aircraft.

"I think in the next two to three weeks the Japs lost something like four or five of their reconnaissance planes, not one got back."

On 16 January 1944 Weggery and Louis repeated their success. This time Weggery flew MA292, also coded 'KW-D', and named 'Verna June II'. Weggery and Louis were again detailed as that day's instant reaction 'Pink Section' of two aircraft and were scrambled to 28,000 ft, then guided by radar to intercept a Ki46 at 29,000 ft. They took turns at making firing passes from the port and starboard rear quarter of the Ki46, four to five each. They caused one engine then the other to catch fire, eventually bringing the enemy aircraft crashing down in the jungle.

"All this time we were attacking, the Japs weren't just sitting around. They were very experienced pilots and they knew what they were doing. The 'Dinah' pilot was forced to take violent evasive action and used the sun with great skill, in an attempt to escape."

During the 16 January combat, when the first of the Ki46's engines had been put out of action, Weggery observed Louis make his fourth or fifth pass and the 'Dinah' crew firing a weapon not seen by him before. He observed a round black object emerge from the tail of the enemy aircraft and 100 yards behind it burst with a puff of smoke into about 12 smaller objects with a 20 yards radius. These in turn exploded showering shrapnel which, fortunately, missed Louis who was only 50 yards short of the 'Dinah' at that moment. The entire combat lasted about four minutes.

At the high altitude at which the two combats took place, the Spitfires cannons tended to freeze. The official combat report on the second combat notes that on his first pass Louis' cannons failed to fire, so that he only had his four machine guns. In Weggery's case only one cannon fired, causing his Spitfire to slew sideways, making aiming extremely difficult. British planners in England had assumed that gun-heaters would be superfluous in the heat of an Indian summer, ignoring the fact that temperatures drop alarmingly as altitude increases.

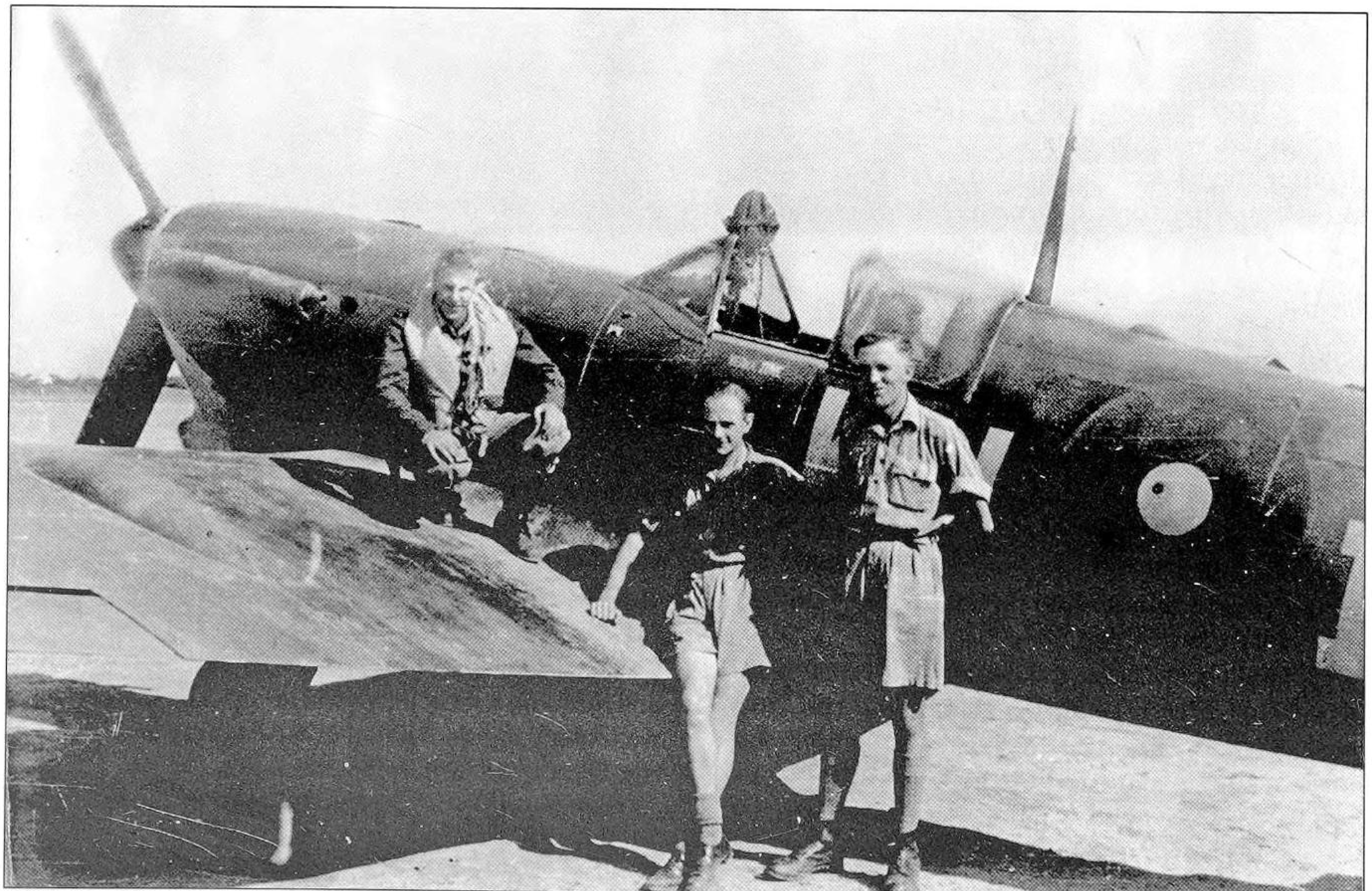
With the Allies' new Spitfires shooting down all their reconnaissance aircraft, the Japanese knew the Allies had a new weapon, but what? Before 615 Squadron received its Spitfires, intercepting a Ki46 had been impossible.

"When Hurricanes tried to intercept the 'Dinahs' they would sit above us at 29 to 30,000 ft and do aerobatics, taunting us, because we were hanging off our props at about 26 or 27,000 ft. They had taken their reconnaissance photos by the time we got near, then they would simply 'pour on the coal' and race back to base.

"Our radar by late 1943 was quite good. Chittagong was well back from the Chinwin Hills and with the Recces coming over so high we had plenty of warning.

"Seeing me wearing the Mae West (life jacket in the photo below) reminds me of an amusing story. Not long after our success with the 'Recces' (Ki46s) the Japanese mounted a big raid on Calcutta. This particular day the Squadron was scrambled and vectored by the controllers straight out over the Bay of Bengal and, as it happened, we didn't make an interception. The Japs knew we had new fighters (the Spitfires) at Chittagong and so they had flown well out across the Bay of Bengal, beyond our range. We'd missed the raid on its way to Calcutta and were finally ordered back to Chittagong to refuel.

"Generally our operations were over land and so we flew without our one man dinghies. The Spitfire's seating arrangement was that you sat on your parachute with a 1½ inch foam cushion between you and it. Flying over water the pad was replaced with your dingy, which was very uncomfortable to sit on. On this occasion we all landed with very little fuel. The



Flying Officer Weggery on the wing of his first Spitfire, 'Verna June', with his ground crew. This Spitfire Mk Vc (Trop) MA349, was shot down on 26 December 1943 while he was away enjoying eight days Christmas leave in Calcutta. "A new young Sergeant Pilot named Wright flew 'Verna June 1' when the Squadron was scrambled to intercept a raid with heavy fighter escort. Wright held back and was picked off by the Japanese fighters." This aircraft's camouflage scheme is similar to MA292 but with the earlier style, larger, blue and white roundels. (SLE Weggery) moment our aircraft stopped rolling every one of us got out of his aircraft and sprinted across to the dispersal hut to get our abandoned dinghies. We thought we were all 'for it' till we saw the CO doing exactly the same!"

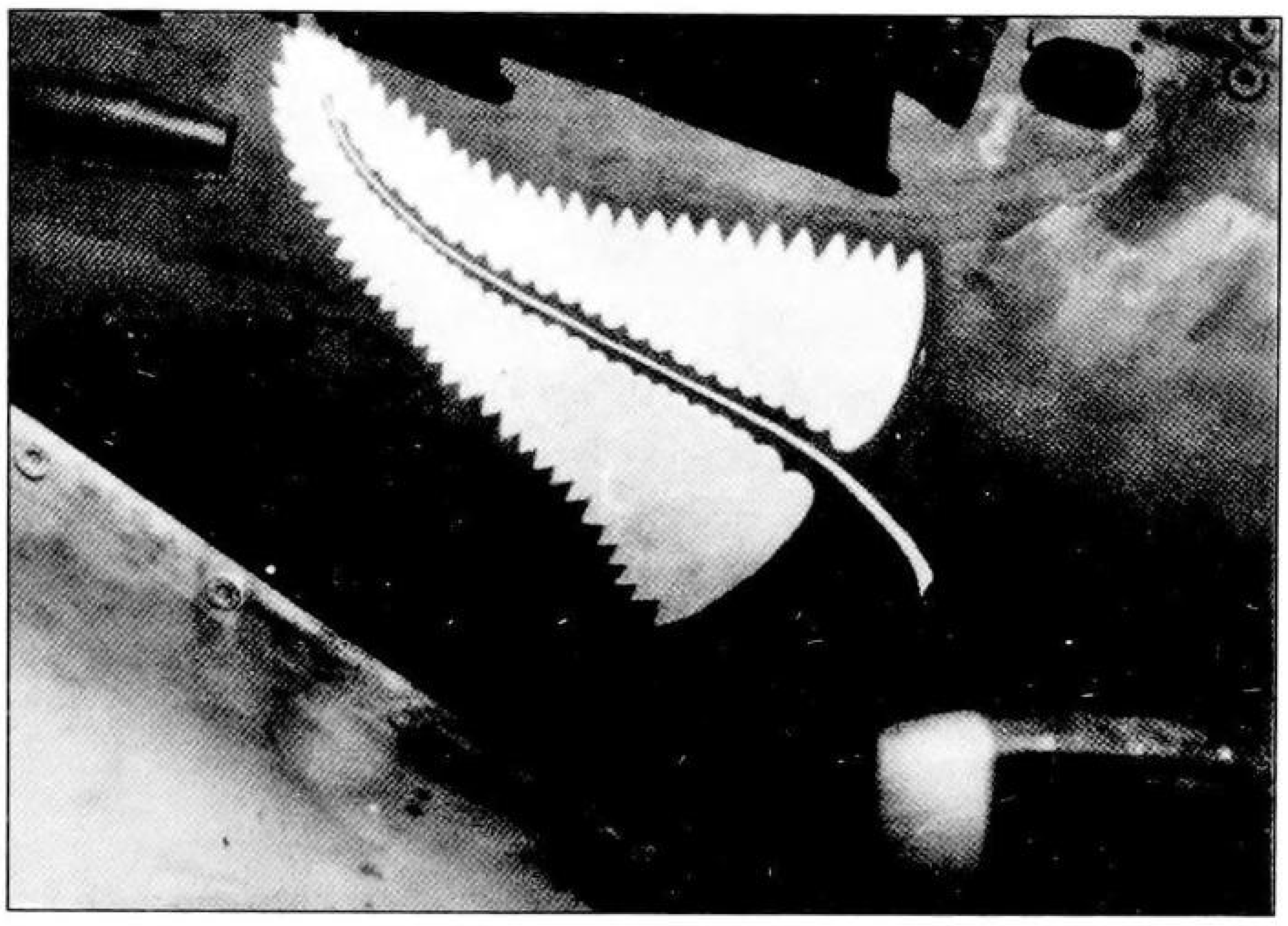
A DAY TO REMEMBER

On 23 November 1943 the Japanese (Army) Air Force in Burma mounted a fighter sweep over East Bengal to tempt the Allies new Spitfires to combat.

"We were scrambled to 26,000 ft and it turned out they were all fighters, no bombers. Amongst them was a new model of Japanese fighter I'd never seen them before and I managed to latch on to two as they flew away from me. I hesitated while attacking because they had dihedral wings, where as previously I had only seen flat (minimal dihedral) winged 'Oscars'. Anyway, I pulled up abreast of these two and they saw me. One set off on a steep left turn and the other climbed straight up and looped over me to get on my tail. I took a shot at the one turning left, but I don't think I hit him."

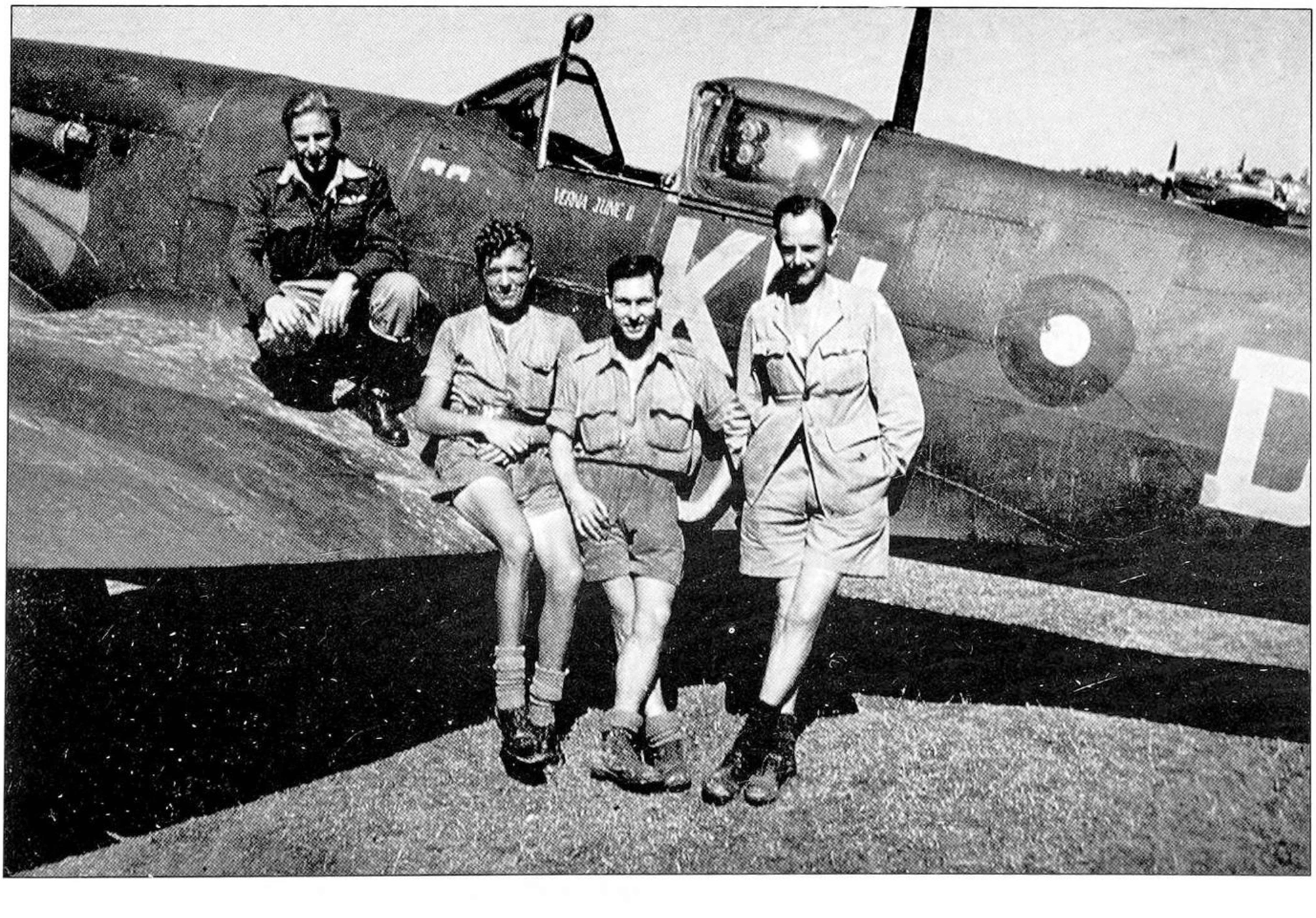
However, Weggery's gun camera captured a good photo of one of these new fighters which helped Allied Intelligence Services identify it as, what at the time was believed to be, a new model of Ki43 'Oscar'.

This same day 615 Squadron lost one Spitfire, flown by a Canadian, Pilot Officer Leonard, who was seriously injured bailing out of his burning fighter. His Spitfire was shot in the engine and glycol tank just forward of the cockpit. The glycol caught



The silver fern nose art on MA292, 'Verna June II,' January 1944. The silver fern (Ponga in Maori) is a semi-official national emblem of New Zealand. The leaves of this large fern are green on top and silvery underneath. (SLE Weggery)

Spitfire Mk Vc (Trop), MA292, 'Verna June II,' January 1944. From the left are, Flying Officer Lawrence Weggery; LAC Barkle, rigger; LAC Baker, armourer and LAC Bagnal, fitter, whose wife's name Vera was painted on the port cannon cowling. Each Spitfire was assigned a rigger and a fitter, while armourers worked with several aircraft. (SLE Weggery)



LAWRENCE WEGGERY RECALLS A TYPICAL DAY 'AT READINESS'...

On 6 December 1943 615 Squadron moved from Chittagong to Dohazari, pictured below.

"To the top right are the trees which helped camouflage the three-sided earth revetments where our aircraft were sheltered there at night, to give some protection from air raids, and where maintenance work was carried out. To the top right are two of the Squadron's 11/2 ton trucks and behind them, partly concealed by trees is the dispersal hut which among other things was equipped with string beds called 'charpoys' where pilots could take extra sleep. At night all personnel, apart from guard details, slept in bamboo 'Basha' huts which were built about two miles into the jungle, in case of air raids.

"Dohazari was a fair weather strip only, created each summer by rolling down rice paddy fields. If the entire squadron was scrambled they would take off in flights, four abreast, then wait for the dust to clear before the next flight took its turn.

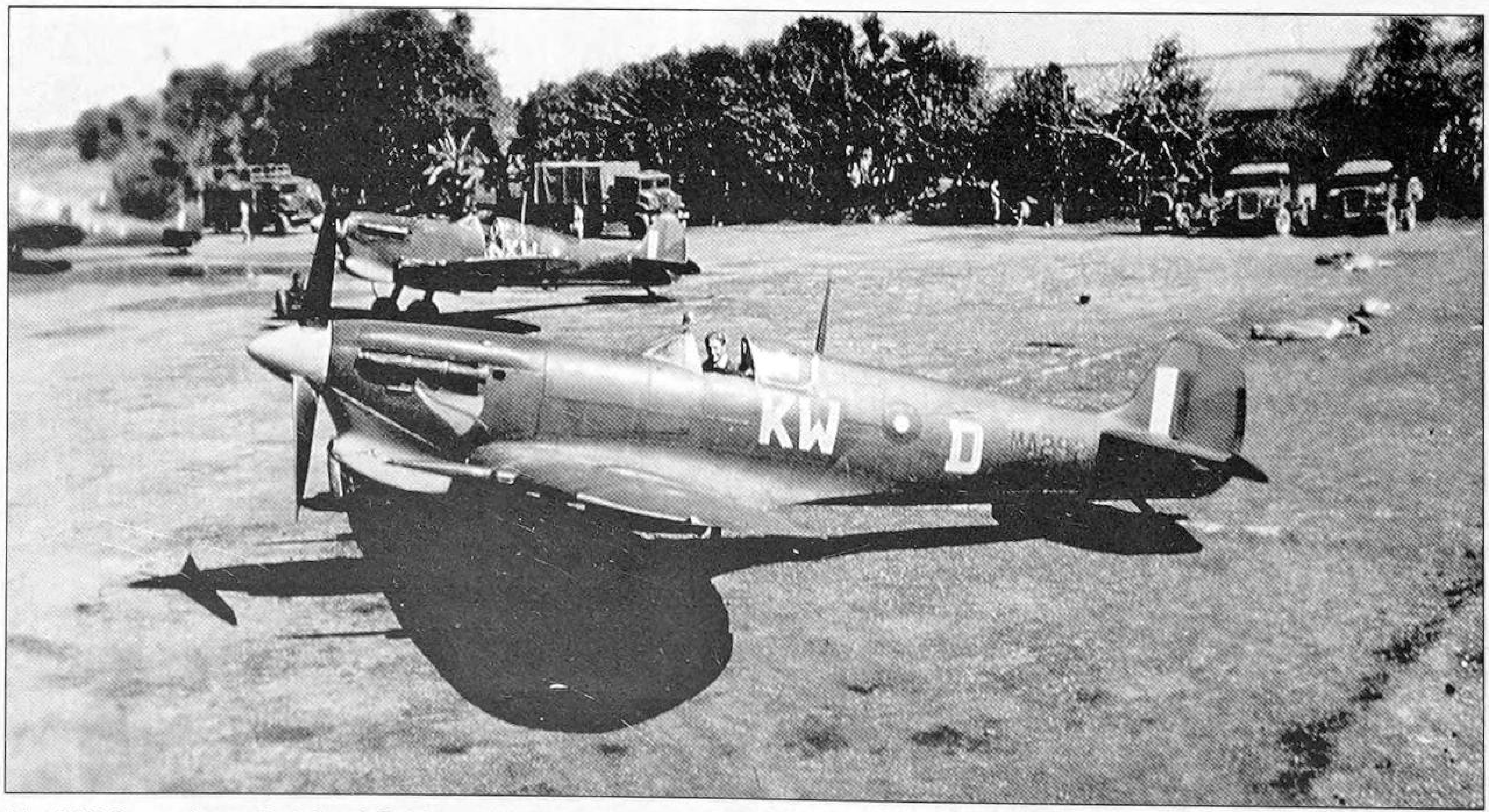
"Each morning at about 4.30AM the Squadron's pilots would be trucked from our Mess to the actual airfield. Each pilot would then taxi his aircraft from its revetment and park it, as you see here, to wait for the day's flying. We left our parachute, helmet and gloves in the aircraft, with the cockpit prepared for a quick 'scramble'. During the day our ground crew would shelter under the wings of the aircraft when they had finished servicing and arming them for the day. Last thing at night we would taxi them back.

"As soon as the alarm went to scramble, whether it be a full Squadron, a flight or 'Pink Section' scramble (which was two Spitfires detailed to intercept individual raiders), a signal flare pistol would be fired at the end of the runway to alert the ground crew. We, the pilots, would immediately be running out of the dispersal hut and they, the ground crew, would climb onto the wings of the aircraft to help us into our parachute, helmet and gloves. They would then strap you in and then stand by the battery starter electrical connection, on the starboard side of the nose, which gave you power to start the engine.

"In spite of the heat at ground level, we always flew with clothing covering our whole body because, if you were shot down, the first flash of flame would take your skin off. At least with one layer of clothing on, you had some protection."

Scramble!

"The duty clerk would receive a phone call with orders to scramble fighters and he would immediately shout out whether it was 'scramble squadron', 'scramble flight' or 'scramble pink section' and then rush outside to fire a red Very flare to alert the ground crews. If I had been sleeping, I'd often be up and running without even opening my eyes and then I'd look around to learn whether it was a whole Squadron scramble, a Flight, or just Pink Section. This became my natural reaction, such was the tension."



No.615 Squadron Spitfire Mk Vcs sitting at dispersal at Dohazari. (SLE Weggery)

fire and streamed back over the cockpit with Leonard struggling to bail out as his aircraft plunged from over 20,000 to 10,000 ft.

"Poor Leonard, he was a big built chap. If you had to bail out of a Spitfire you had to pull a release lever on the side of the canopy and then push out with your elbows to lift the canopy off its rails so that it would fly off. Unfortunately his canopy jammed only about nine inches open. He managed to get his head and one shoulder out, while the rest of his body was still inside. He stood up and pulled the rip chord so that the draft of air hauled the parachute out and the chute hauled him out. He took the weight of the canopy on his left shoulder as the canopy ripped off. He got out, but he never flew again, the damage done to all his muscles was so severe. When I last saw him, before he went back to Canada, his shoulder just looked like a thin bone, all his muscle tone had gone.

"Our pilots were from all round the Commonwealth and even included one Belgian, while we had the Hurricanes. Chris Ortmans, the Belgian, was shot down in a 'dog-fight' and then shot dead on the end of his parachute by a Japanese pilot, after bailing out."

Supporting the 14th Army

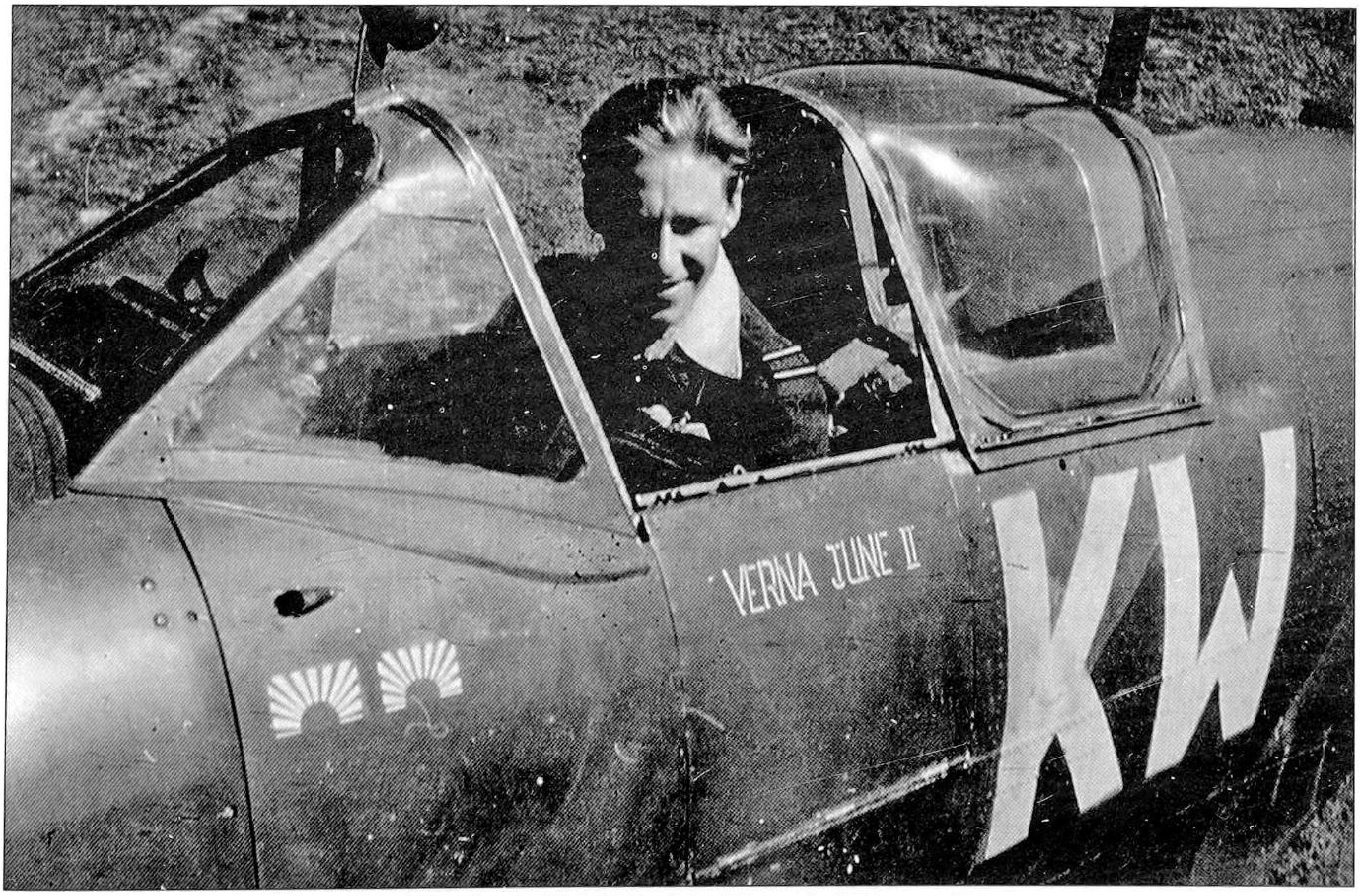
No.615 Squadron operated intensively in support of allied ground forces from February 1944 onward, intercepting Japanese raids, ground attack, escorting bombers and Dakotas which were dropping supplies to the Army and the 'Chindits'. Weggery's log book records eleven sorties on 26 and 27 April alone! For the days operations, the squadron flew into temporary airstrips in the Imphal Valley and returned to their base, Silchar West (in Assam, India) at night.

Unfortunately Weggery was struck down by malaria, caught when travelling to a new temporary base called Jorhat. He and 14 others were forced to sleep in the back of their truck without mosquito netting when delayed by road works. He was hospitalised on 19 May 1944 for the malaria and also suffered peritonitis while convalescing at the 47th British Military Hospital, Calcutta.

During his period of hospitalisation 615 Squadron moved to Palel, in the southern Imphal Valley.

"They had a very hard time, the Squadron was sleeping in slit trenches near their landing strip with the Japanese infiltrating the area at night. The Japanese also operated a unit of Indian troops in the area, mainly from Singapore. The politics of the situation being that the Japanese and Indian forces were to 'liberate' India from the British. The problem for our army was to identify friend from foe when these forces were encountered."

By the time Weggery had recovered and returned to 615 Squadron on 4 October they were enjoying a well earned rest at Baigachi. He never flew operationally again.



Flight Lieutenant Lawrence Weggery in the cockpit of 'Verna June II'. (SLE Weggery)

GROUND CREW REMEMBERED

"Their work maintaining the aircraft was marvellous. Our ground crews were all British RAF personnel.

"On occasions, at Silchar, orders would come through at 8 or 9PM at night with the target for the next day. These fellows would be hauled out of bed at 9 or 10PM and under floodlights, would labour for two to three hours to attach long range tanks. I can remember these fellows lying on their backs in puddles of water, caused by the monsoons, struggling to support an empty 90 gallon drop tank up under the Spitfire's centre section, with their arms and legs, while another man was in the cockpit trying to connect up the tank's release mechanism. They would work through plane after plane then go back to bed, only to be woken up again at 5 o'clock in the morning to arm and fuel the aircraft, then stand by for any alarm.

"Ground crew were always very cautious about who *they* flew with. At one stage we were stationed at Silchar and operating by day from a forward strip in the Imphal Valley. One of the Spitfires had burst a tire and couldn't be flown out that night."

The next day, 28 April 1944, Weggery and LAC Bond were sent in the Squadron's Harvard, with a spare wheel, so that Bond could repair the Spitfire.

"I heard from some others that the first thing this ground crew chap asked was 'who's flying the Harvard!'."

HOME TO NEW ZEALAND

Every cloud has a silver lining...

As a teenager, at Hutt Valley High School, Lawrence Weggery had learned to play the cornet in the school brass band. While taking a few days leave in Calcutta in 1943 he was invited to join a servicemen's band run by the Calcutta Salvation Army. There he met Enid, the daughter of Danish Salvation Army missionaries. By late 1944, when he had recovered from his malaria and peritonitis doctors advised that he would never really be free of malaria until he returned to a cooler climate. At about the same time he also learned of the New Zealand Government offer that any serviceman with three years overseas service could apply for repatriation. Also, any married man could bring his wife with him at no extra cost. Even though she was only eighteen at the time, Enid's parents agreed to the couple marrying. They married and honeymooned in Darjeeling; then travelled south to Calcutta and eventually were given passage to New Zealand, arriving on 1 April 1945.

Post war the Weggerys served as Salvation Army Officers in New Zealand and overseas with both Lawrence and Enid rising to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the Salvation Army. They had a family of one son, two daughters and twelve grand children.

Lawrence Weggery passed away in May 2006 in Wellington, New Zealand.

Another photo of Lawrence Weggery in the cockpit of 'Verna June II'. Note the name Vera painted on the cannon barrel cover by one of his ground crew. (SLE Weggery)

SQUADRON LEADER J G WEST, DFM

Jeffrey George West volunteered for the RNZAF shortly after the outbreak of war and was called up in May 1940. He was the youngest of five brothers with the others all serving in the Army. After initial training in New Zealand, he shipped out to England and undertook his final operational training at No.58 OTU. His first flight in a Spitfire was on 3 March 1941, in Mk I L1018.

THE TANGMERE WING UNDER DOUGLAS BADER

Sergeant West's first operational posting was with No.616 Squadron based at Tangmere, on the south coast of England. There, Douglas Bader, the famous legless fighter pilot, was one of the newly appointed three-squadron Wing Commanders. Bader was two and a half years older than Jeff West who, at 28, was older than most RAF pilots at that time and at the upper age limit for operational fighter pilots. The squadron had a complement of 24 pilots and 18 aircraft with its activity consisting of training flights, in preparation for the RAF's summer offensive over occupied Europe. "Bader was a fantastic bloke, he really was," remembered West. Bader was then one of the RAF's leading aces and held in awe by those he commanded.

On 7 June 1941 Jeff West made his first offensive patrol over France, a flight lasting 1 hour 50 minutes in a Spitfire Mk II, as part of a Wing strength patrol. As the Tangmere Wing's summer campaign intensified, West recorded his first combat success, one Bf 109 damaged near Lille on 7 August 1941, flying Mk VB W3424.

'A' Flight 616 Squadron, shortly after Jeff West joined the Squadron. From the left, back row; Sergeant McCairns, Pilot Officer Philip 'Nip' Hepple, Flight Lieutenant Kenneth Holden (Flight Commander). Pilot Officer Johnnie Johnson (eventually the RAF's leading Ace), Sergeant George Mabbett (killed 1941). Crouching; Sergeant Jeffrey West and Sergeant Brewer (killed 1941). (J West)

CIRCUS NO.68 – 9 AUGUST 1941

On the fateful day of Bader's demise, Jeff West flew as his No.2 in Spitfire Mk VB W3517. In his log book for 9 August, West made notes regarding 1½ Bf 109Fs destroyed. The half victory was credited following Bader re-interpreting events of a combat several days earlier, when West had also flown as his No.2. After that mission Bader saw that the doped patches covering West's gun ports were broken and realised that West had also fired his guns at a particular Bf 109. Bader insisted that the victory may well have been partly achieved by West, even though West felt sure the victory was Bader's alone ('I had only given the 109 a squirt for good luck'). Jeff West was subsequently credited with half this victory at a time when leading aces, the likes of Malan, Tuck and Bader, were on scores of 19 and 20 each and the RAF was emphasising their victory totals, as a propaganda tool. This incident struck the then Sergeant West as a tremendous show of Bader's generous leadership style.

"Several days before Circus No.68, Wing Commander Bader gathered all the Tangmere Wing pilots, including the Sergeants (the RAF seemed to regard Sergeant Pilots as a necessary evil – we were never asked to contribute to discussions on tactics – never!) He spoke to us as a group after a Wing photograph and commented that it had come to his attention that the No.2s were 'wet nursing' the No.1s. Remember that the finger-four formation was a relatively new innovation in Bader's Wing. The Wing Commander continued, 'My job is to get you to where the enemy is, and your job is to shoot them down. After an engagement, immediately join up with the nearest Spitfire you see. Preferably join up with your leader, but don't just fly around France – or anywhere else – on your own.' Bader stressed this point, 'My job is to get you to where the enemy is - your job is to shoot them down'."

DIVE AND SCATTER

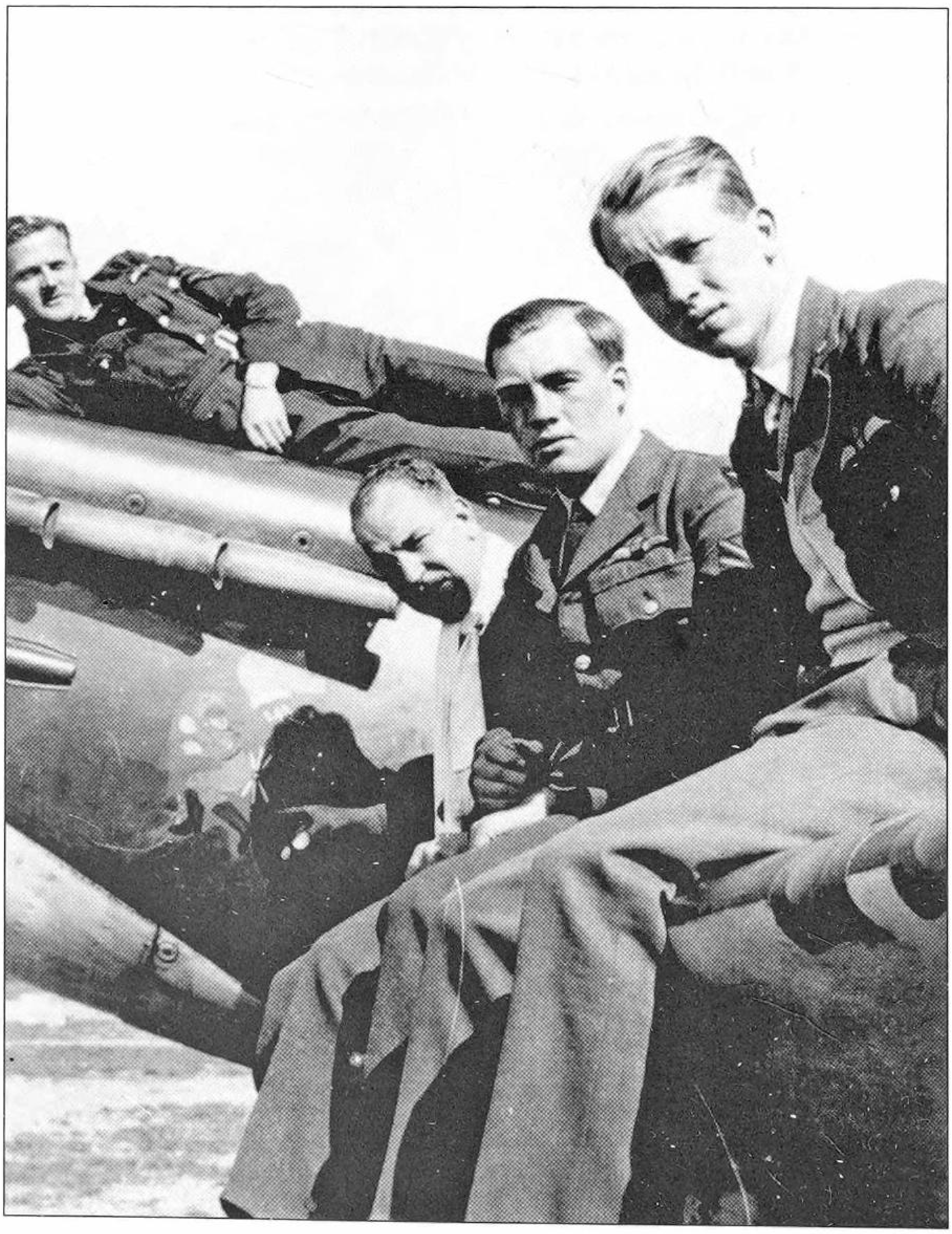
"I thought that Bader was tired and anxious by that stage (August 1941).

"I recall the weather was pretty mucky the day we lost the Wing Commander. Over France there were about 17 German aircraft sighted coming up, but well below us, and Douglas called, 'Right chaps, we're going down'. The four of us in his flight went down and the rest of the Squadron (initially) stayed up. I wouldn't have attacked from that height. We were about 5000 feet above them and came screaming down, Bader, myself, Dundas and Johnson.

"I had one (Bf 109) just come up (into my sights) and was getting

From the left. Sergeant Jeffrey West (RNZAF), Sergeant Brewer, Sergeant Mabbett and Pilot Officer Hepple, with Spitfire Mk VA W3185, the personal aircraft of Wing Commander Douglas Bader. Most sources describe this photo as being of Bader's earlier Mk IIA, however, when the author pointed this out to Jeff West he insisted that the reason the photo was taken was because it showed Bader's personal marking newly applied to the Mk VA.

The 'boot kicking Hitler out of Europe' cartoon is similar to that which appeared on Bader's Battle of Britain Hurricane, but now with a roughly shaped map of Europe as a background. (J West)



ready to 'press the tittie' when I realised I had picked the same one as Douglas; I had to look for another one. The 109 to the left went up in a screaming turn so, with Bader's instructions not to 'wet nurse' the No.1 in mind, I thought, ah! I'll go after him because I had all the speed in the world. So I pulled up, across Douglas, after this Bf 109 that went up and I think that Douglas followed *his* 109 down."

During this initial dive down, Pilot Officer Johnson also swung his Spitfire from the right side of the diving quartet to the left, beneath and out of sight of West. All four pilots jockeyed to take a shot.

"All the 109s, except the one I fired at, turned on their backs and dived down. Remember that we still had eight Spitfires above us as top cover. When I pulled my nose up to fire I nearly rammed this 109. I nearly put my port wing through his cockpit. I could see the German pilot slumped in his cockpit. I felt that he had been shot by me as I was the only one who fired at him.

"My immediate thought was, 'I've shot someone'. As a Christian, I thought 'I've done him'. That was the first thought that swept through my mind. I believe I had that thought because I could see him at such close quarters.

"At this point the 109 spun and I spun on top of him. When I came out of the spin there was nothing in sight, nothing! All my instruments were tumbling, the compass going like a yo-yo. However, I knew the position of the sun and so then realised the direction of England. I gradually settled down and collected my thoughts. I put plenty of speed on realising I was on the right vector for 'mother and home'.

"At this point I saw two aeroplanes away down below, just above the cloud, so I headed for them. As I approached I saw one was an Bf 109 and the other a Spitfire giving chase. I had the altitude so I sped after them and as I was catching up they both went into a climb, the starboard aileron came off the 109 and the Spitfire flew away. So I closed on the 109 and gave him the rest of my ammunition, which was quite a few rounds, and then chased after the Spitfire, down through the cloud layer.

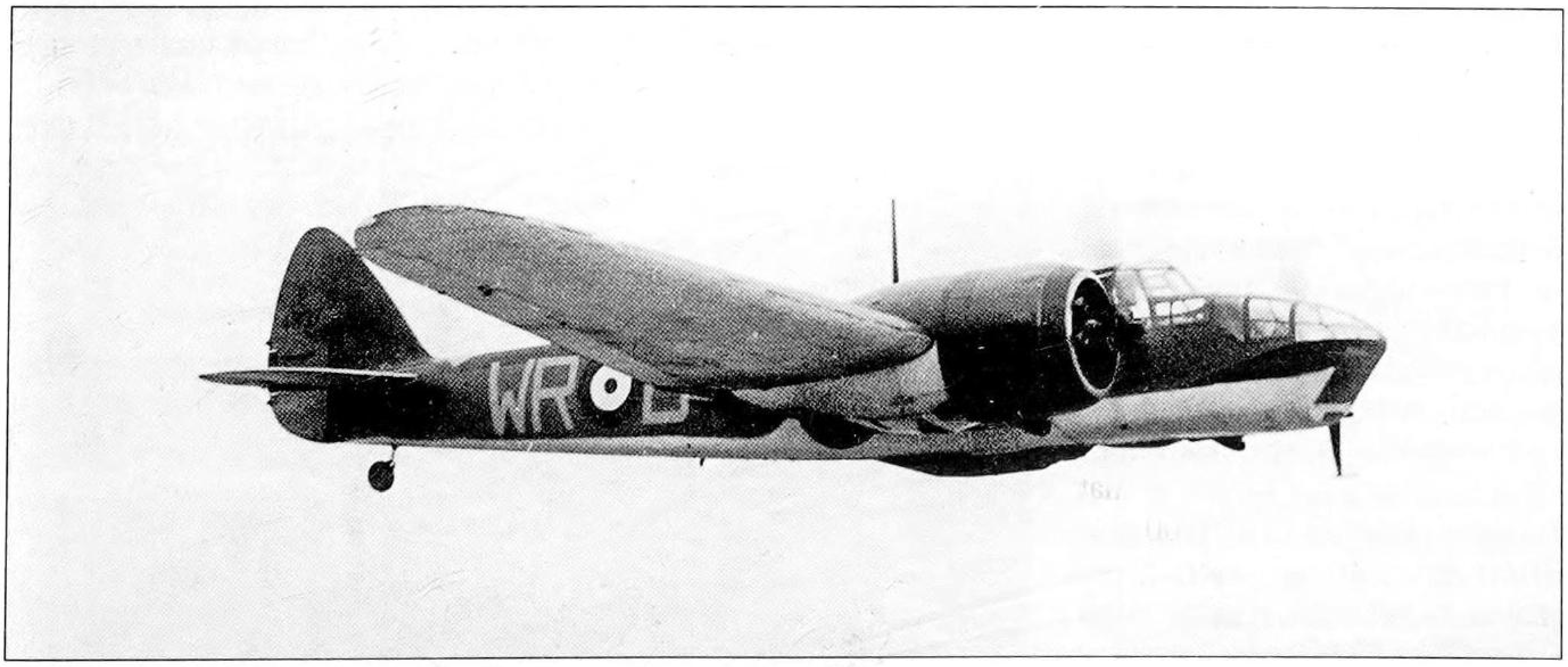
"I got over the French coast on the way home by myself and I suddenly thought, 'My God! I've lost the C.O. Maybe he's in the sea'. So I flew up to Gravelines, then came back looking for anyone in the water, but didn't see anything. By the time I got back to Tangmere, all our squadron's pilots were down. When they saw me they asked, 'Where's the Wing Commander' and I replied 'My God, I've lost him!'."

The pilots gathered, anxious about the fate of Bader. After giving his account of the day's engagement, other pilots confirmed seeing West's victory and his Spitfire spin on top of the Bf 109; he was credited with a 'destroyed'. His account of the later sighting of a Spitfire shooting an aileron off a Bf 109, was accepted as confirmation of a Johnnie Johnson victory – Johnson had recounted his version of events before West landed.

"In Dogsbody section's initial dive, Johnnie Johnson become separated from Cocky. I don't know what happened to Cocky. He never shot at anything, apparently. But, we were split up in a matter of seconds when in the initial dive, we dropped 4-5000 feet with power on, so we would have been travelling at about 450mph."

How was Douglas Bader lost?

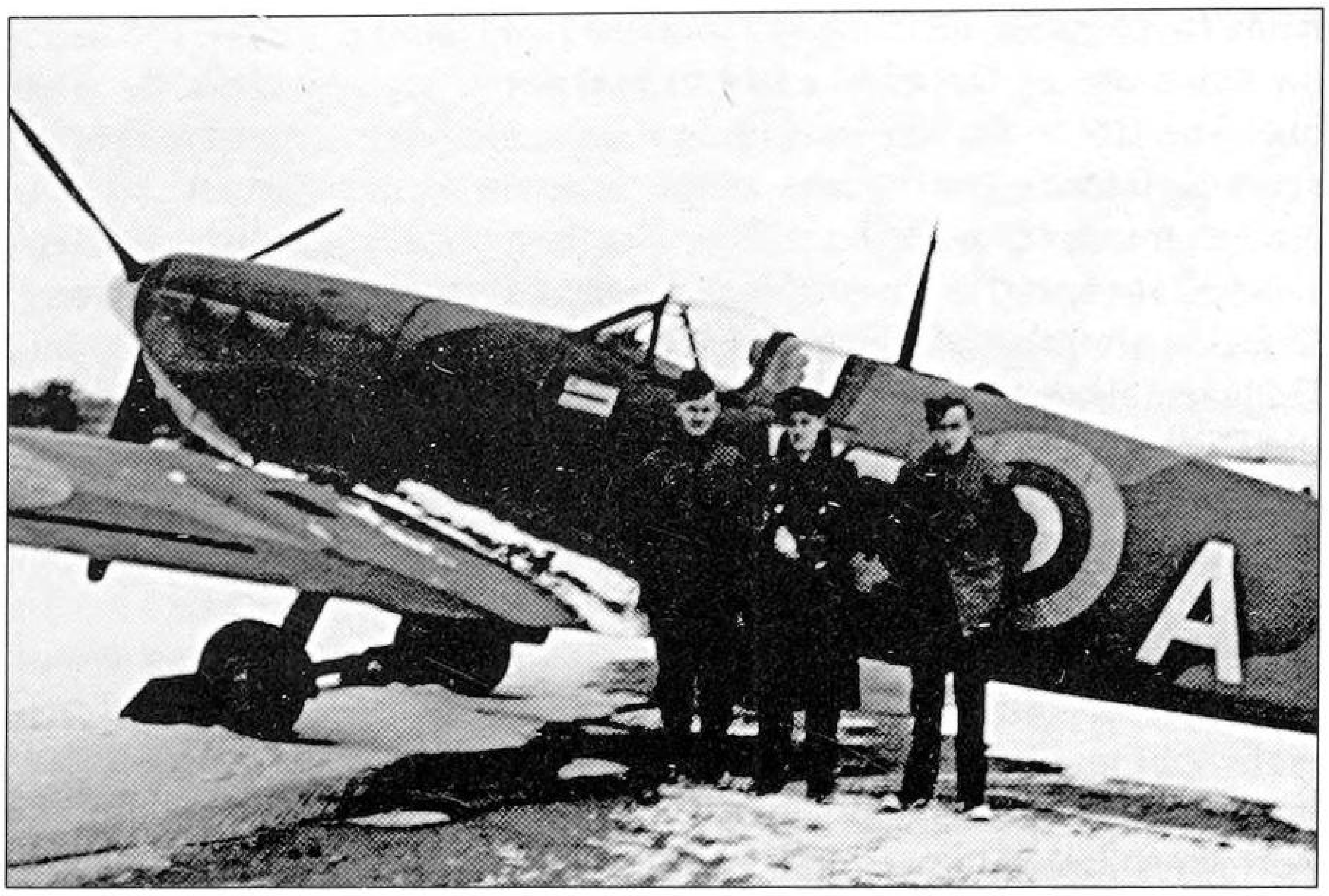
"As far as how Douglas Bader was lost? No one knows, it is all conjecture. I was as close to him as anybody, and I don't think he was shot down. I think somebody crashed into him and cut his tail off. When a flight of Spitfire Mk Vs, (which do not have fuel injection)



Bristol Blenheim Mk IV 'WR-D' of 248 Squadron. Some Circus operations were constructed around nothing more than the escort of a few Blenheims, which were to bomb targets in occupied France. (G M Baird) dives, you all turn on your backs and you cannot see what is under your wings.

"One thing that disturbs me is this information in *'Bader's Tangmere Spitfires'*. Dilip Sarkar, the author, relates that we were diving down on only four Bf 109s. My recollection is that there were at least seventeen of them.

"The last thing that Douglas said was, 'plenty more chaps – don't all fire at the same one' and in view of the lecture he gave us several days before Circus No.68, he'd have shot me if I'd fired at the same 109 as him! To this day, I've have no conscience that I did not do what I was supposed to do. Although I regret following his instructions (in selecting an independent target) because he was worth more than a 109."[1]



Squadron Leader Colin Gray with two of his ground crew at Kings Cliffe, January 1942. Gray took command of No.616 Squadron in September 1941, while they were on rest. His Spitfire Mk Vb is finished in the Day Fighter camouflage scheme of Dark Green and Ocean Grey upper surfaces with Medium Sea Grey lower surfaces. Spinner, code letters and rear fuselage band are Sky. Note the Squadron Leader's pennant painted beneath the windscreen. (B Gray)

Tactics

"All of the tactics developed at that time by Douglas Bader and Cocky Dundas were copied from the Germans. If it hadn't been for Douglas and the ideas he imbued us with such as the finger-four formation, the RAF would still have flown the line-astern formation."

Posted on Rest

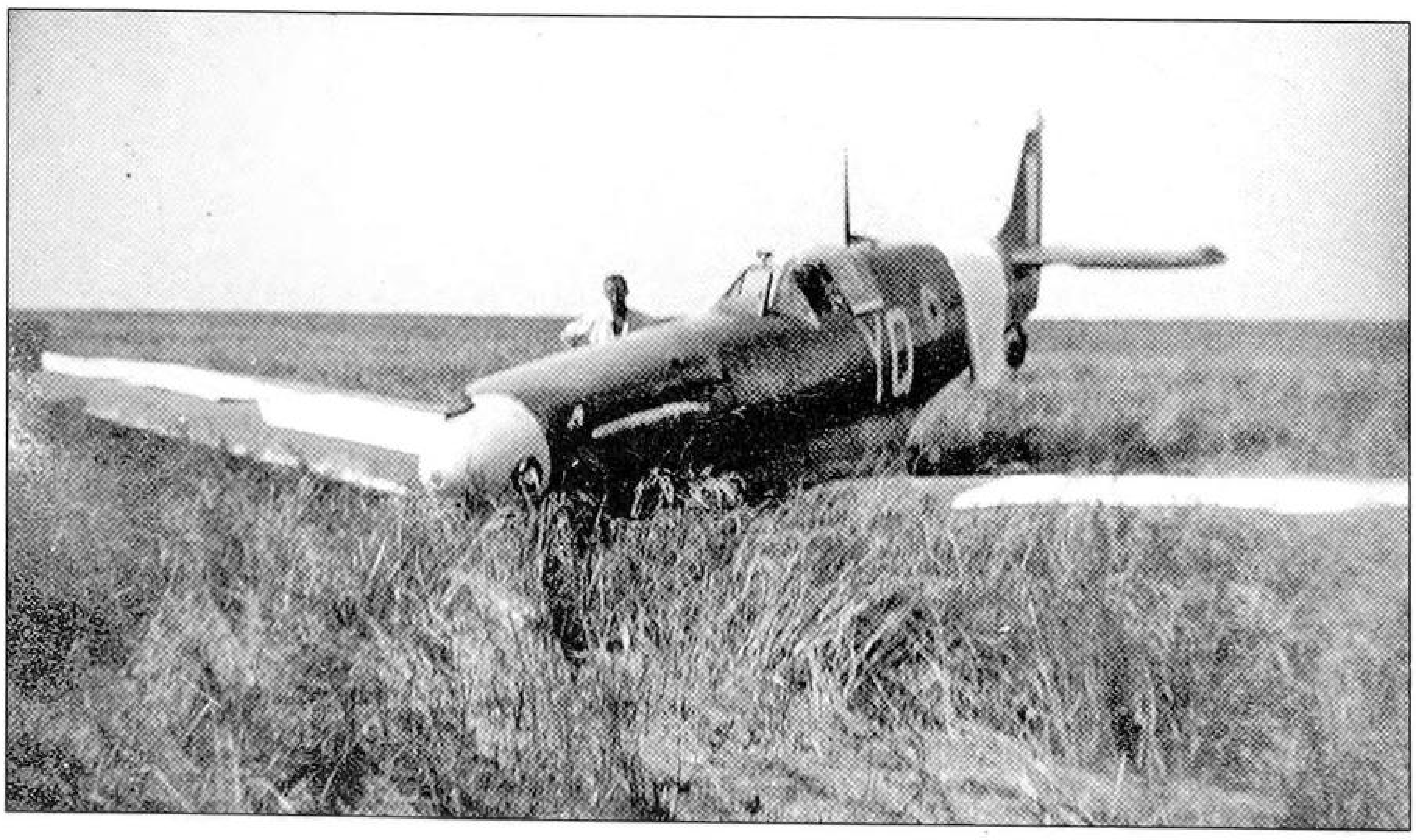
Shortly after Bader was lost, No.616 Squadron moved to Lincolnshire for rest. The squadron left behind its Spitfire Mk Vbs for 41 Squadron which replaced it in the South. The machines left behind were later production Vbs with metal, rather than fabric covered ailerons.

"We travelled north by train, because the weather was not good enough to fly. I recall that Johnnie Johnson, Philip 'Nip' Hepple, Roy Marples and myself were the only pilots still on the Squadron from the time I joined. Colin Gray, who was a beautiful pilot and a great chap, was promoted in to command the Squadron, in September 1941."

Jeff West had been commissioned by then and decorated with the Distinguished Flying Medal. Through a series of circumstances, West found himself with a Malta posting and was one of the first group of experienced Spitfire pilots flown to Malta, by Sunderland flying boat.

Following an unauthorised night low-flying incident, 'Nip' Hepple was removed from the Squadron. He had been 'A' Flight commander and now as senior pilot on that Flight, West lead the it for a week or two. He fully expected to be promoted to Flight Lieutenant, with a pay rise, and be confirmed as 'A' Flight leader. However, Gray chose Pilot Officer Murray, a newly arrived

A crashed No.616 Squadron Spitfire Mk Vb draped in white cloth to warn patrolling friendly aircraft not to strafe it. By the same token, enemy aircraft may well have been encouraged to do so! The photo was probably taken while the squadron was resting in Lincolnshire. (J West)



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[1] A 2006 television documentary by Wildfire TV in the UK identifies a 'friendly fire' incident as the most likely cause of Bader's demise.

Canadian with no combat experience. West felt angry about this and confronted Gray with his dissatisfaction and requested another posting.

No.616 Squadron was now based at Wittering, with fellow New Zealander Pat Jameson as Wing Commander (Flying) and Group Captain Basil Embry as Station Commander. Jameson took West to visit Embry and discuss the situation. The result was a posting to No.610 Squadron at Drem in Scotland, with a promotion to Flight Lieutenant and as a Flight Commander. However, before West could head north, volunteers for service overseas were called for. Being from New Zealand, Jeff West was already overseas and so the thought of a promotion, combined with a posting to a warmer climate, was most appealing. His last flight with No.616 was on 8 February 1942 and his log book was endorsed with a recommendation by Colin Gray.

To Malta

West, along with thirteen other experienced Spitfire pilots, assembled at Bush House in London in March 1942. They travelled to the seaplane base near Plymouth (Mount Battenhoven). The plan was that these pilots would familiarise themselves with Maltese airspace, in Hurricanes, in preparation for the air-delivery of their Spitfires.

"Malta was no picnic
- it wasn't fun in any shape or form."

"The first Spitfires delivered to Malta were thirteen Mk Vbs, flown from the Royal Navy Aircraft Carrier HMS *Eagle*. With that first group was Phil Hepple who had avoided a court marshal, for the unauthorised low flying incident, by volunteering to serve in Malta. He was a great friend. I was very fond of 'Nip'. First to land was Stan Grant, later to be Squadron Leader Grant and command our Squadron. 'Nip' landed second."

Half an hour after the Spitfires landed Stan Turner, who also arrived in the Sunderland, organised himself and West to fly display sorties over the islands so that the anti-aircraft gunners could familiarise themselves with the shape of a Spitfire. Next day, the newspaper reported...

"Spring is in the air,
the Spitfires are here.'
and
'While the daredevils were showing off their prowess,
the Hurricanes were up in the sun,
fighting the Hun."

Over the months, more Spitfires were delivered and heavy air fighting continued through the summer. Malta was the lowest ebb of the war for Jeff West. 'I never thought I would survive 1942. However, there was a great spirit on the island, even though the food was poor and there were attacks of dysentery, which we called 'Malta Dog.' The dysentery was quite debilitating to fly with!

The supply situation was so desperate at times, that fuel and ammunition were brought in by submarine.'

New Tactics over Malta

"When Air Vice-Marshal Keith Park and Lord Gort arrived things were reorganised. Prior to them, while I was there, things (regarding air tactics) were a shambles. One of Park's changes was to try and attack raids before they reached Malta, which was all very well, if you had effective air-sea rescue – which we did not. While I was there, I didn't like to be out of sight of land for that very reason.

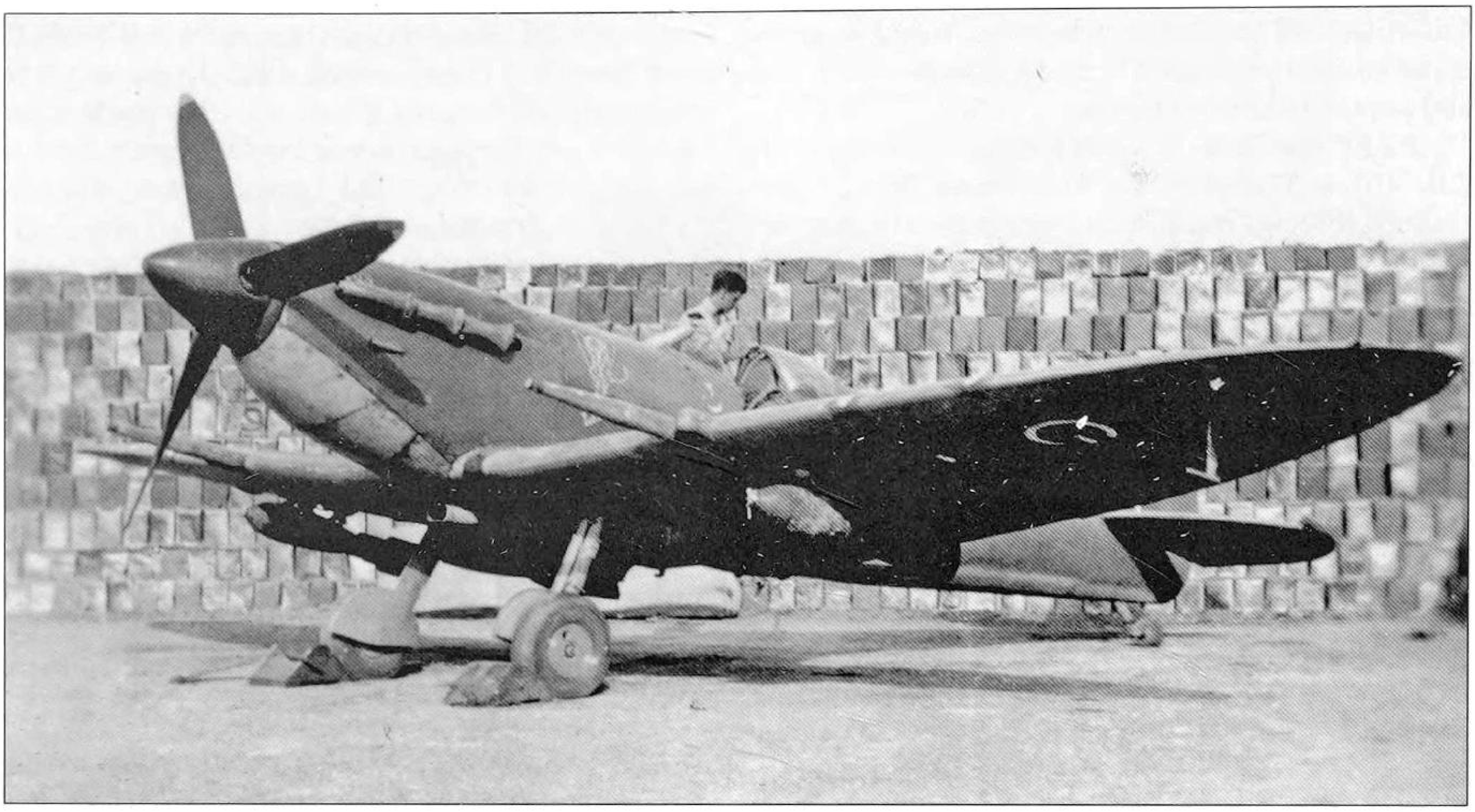
"There was nowhere really to land on Malta except the airfields because of the way farm fields were divided up with stone walls. There was one occasion when a Canadian pilot named Latimer, and I were out for a walk (on a day off) when we saw a Spitfire being harried by a 109. It turned towards Takali airfield down below us and looked as though it would make it. Two more 109s appeared and he turned away from the airfield towards us."

West and Latimer were exploring a small valley above Takali. Badly damaged, but still under control, the Spitfire flew up the valley and crashed fifty metres from where the two were, and adjacent to an anti-aircraft gun emplacement.

"I ran towards the crash, jumping over a couple of stone fences and when I arrived the army gunners were trying to pull the pilot from his burning cockpit. They had the canopy slid back but the pilot was still strapped into his Sutton harness. I pushed them out of the way, dropped the cockpit door and pulled the release pin on his harness and got his shoulders out of the plane. A couple of 109s gave us a 'squirt' while we were trying to pull him clear.

"Medics arrived and put him on a stretcher. A shin-bone was sticking out where a cannon shell had got him, his Mae West (life jacket) was smouldering, his broken ribs were sticking out and he looked up at me and coughed his blood all over me, his eyes rolled up. A later report said that he died in hospital but I'm sure he died in my hands. He was a Norwegian boy; it's not very nice..."

On another occasion, Jeff West witnessed a pair of 109s shoot down a Spitfire and the pilot successfully bail out. "They did not shoot him in his parachute but flew close over the top of the 'chute' causing it to collapse. He fell onto rocks and was killed. He was buried wrapped in a blanket, as we had no coffins.



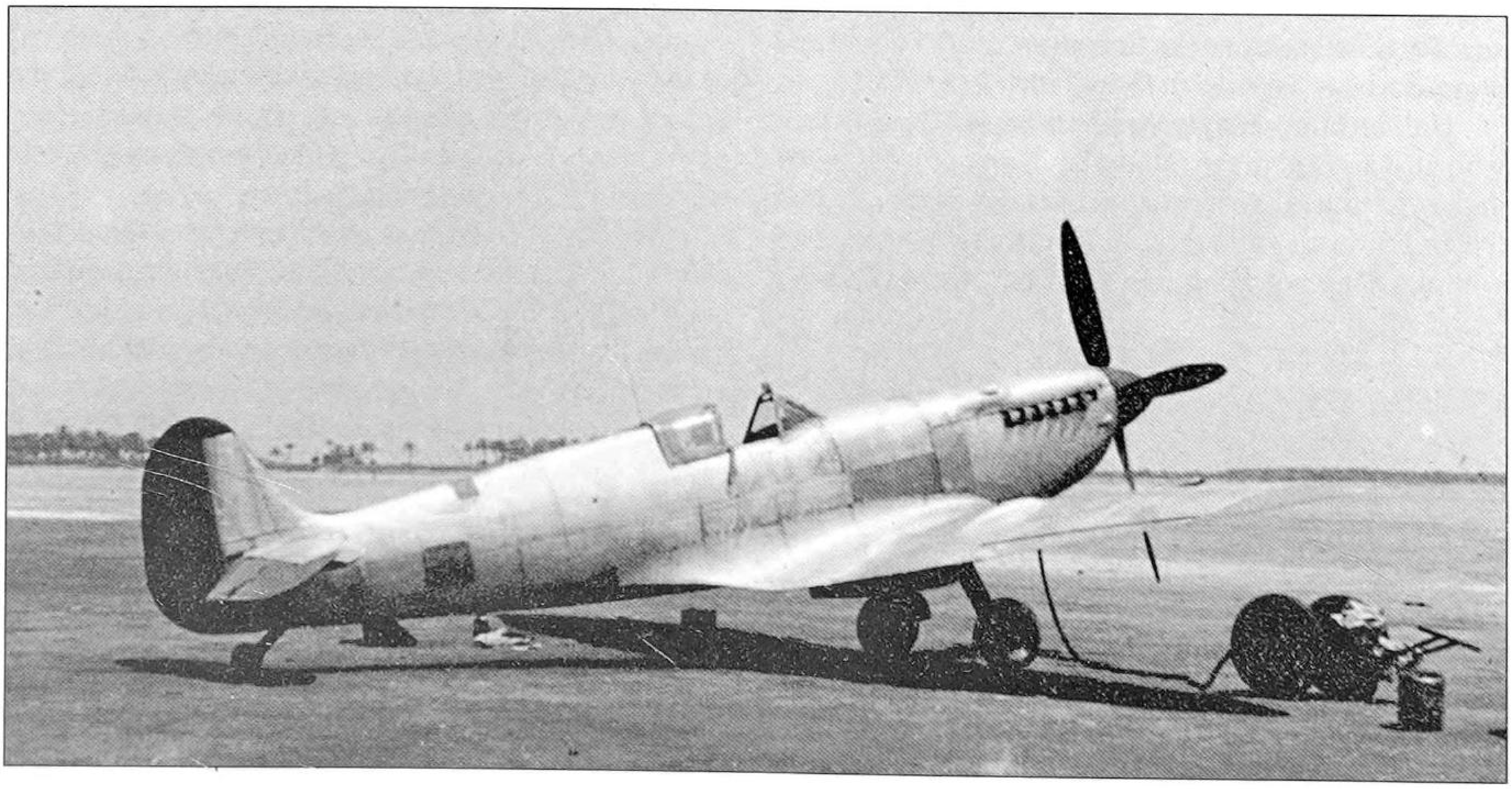
At the ceremony the wrapped body was placed on a stretcher and with pallbearers holding it up, a union jack was draped over it to make it look as though the body was on a raised box. Photos were taken to send to his family. 'Don't you send photos like this to my family if I'm killed!' I thought."

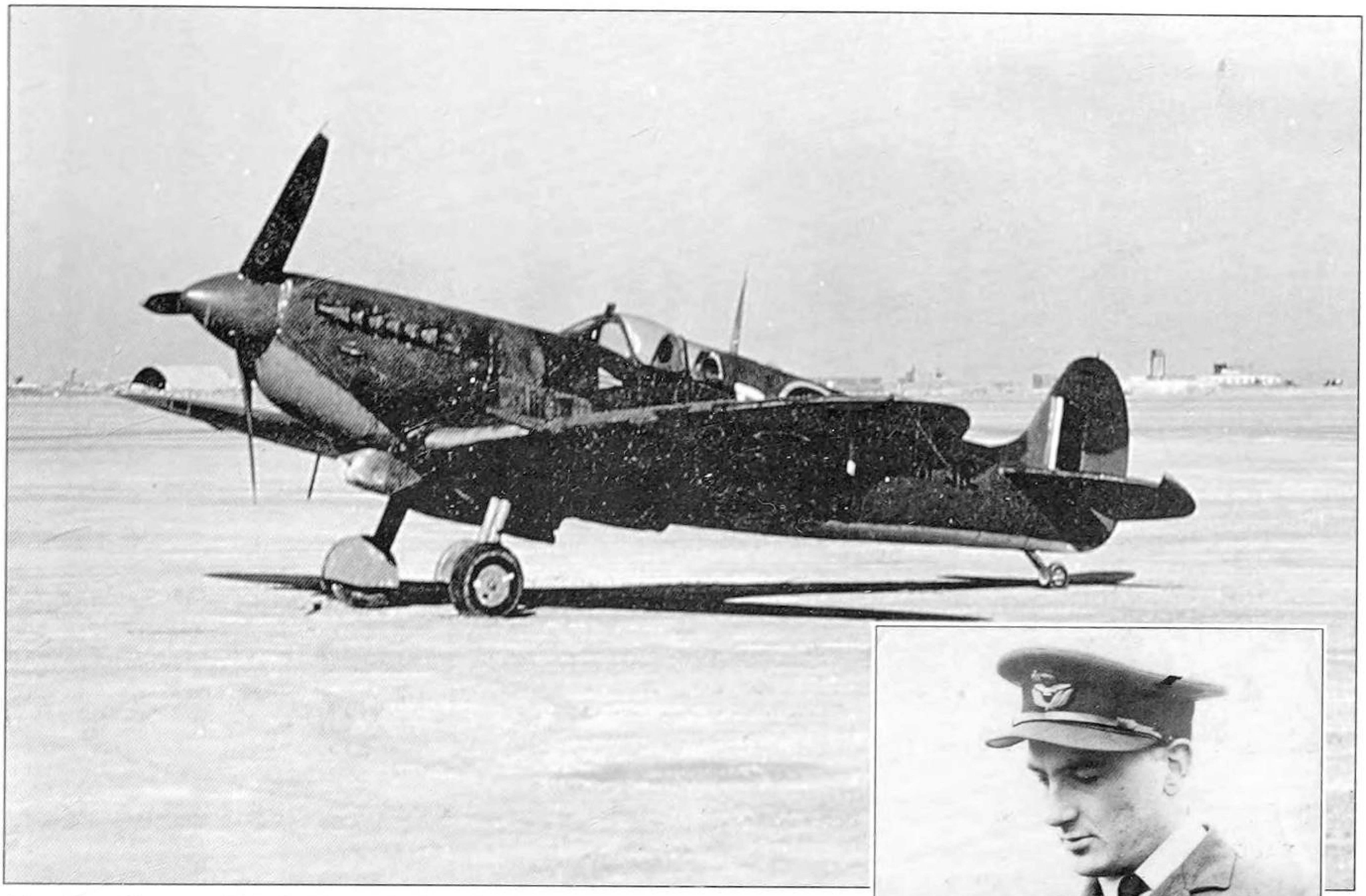
DERECK 'BILL' KAIN

"At one stage we had a visit from Lord Tedder during a raid and he was up on the parapet of our hotel, which overlooked our airfield. Some 109s swept past below us doing slow rolls. Tedder, moved to anger, said that he must get us reinforcements, but the best that could be arranged was a squadron of Hurricanes from North Africa."

A No.1435 Squadron Spitfire fighter-bomber on Malta. This photo dates from 1943 when the island was safe from invasion. Note the petrol containers, filled with sand and built into blast walls. (Neil Schrader)

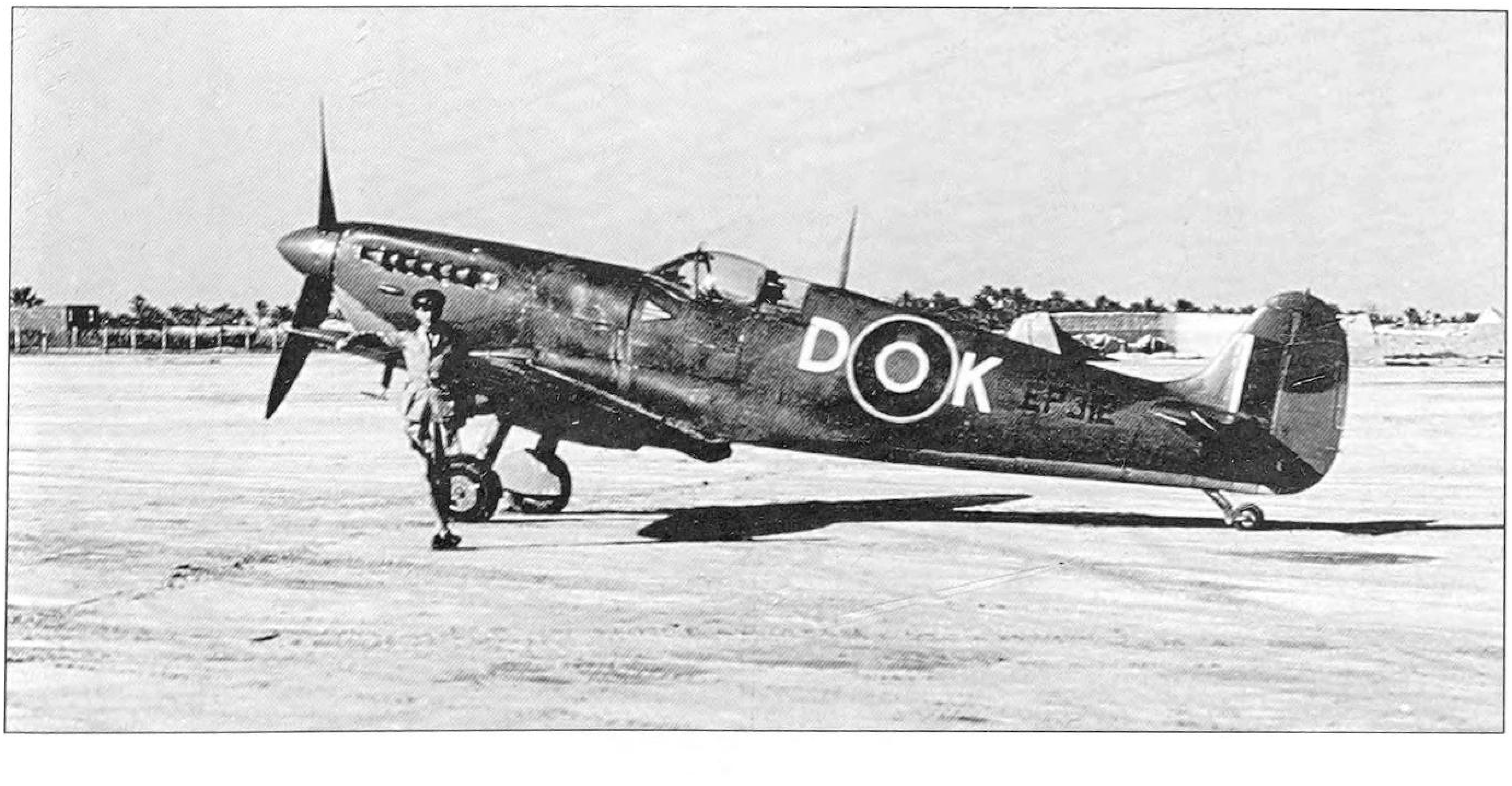
Spitfire Mk IXc EN399 in an unpainted state at Aboukir, Egypt, 1944. After some success with modifying Spitfire Mk Vs to intercept high-flying Luftwaffe Ju 86P reconnaissance aircraft, the RAF worked with Mk IXs. By 1944, when this photo and the one below were taken, the threat had largely receded. (J West)





Above and below. This Spitfire Mk Vb EP312 was the personal mount of Wing Commander Dereck (Bill) Kain and was photographed here at Ed Ku, Egypt in May 1944 At this time Kain's job was to keep an overview watch on the serviceability of North African fighter airfields. During an interview with Kerry Carlyle in 1996 Bill Kain related an incident where he flew into an isolated, un-manned, strip to check its condition, only to be greeted by the site of an unknown B-17 with no squadron or theatre markings. American soldiers guarding the B-17 made it clear that its passengers were very important visitors and 'we are on the same side, but you should leave right now'. (D Kain via K Carlyle)

Dereck (Bill) Kain, about 1940. (D Kain via K Carlyle)



This was No.229 Squadron led by Squadron Leader Dereck 'Bill' Kain. They arrived in two flights, on 27 March 1942. Jeff West flew two sorties that day as escort for the incoming Hurricanes. They were in action immediately and scored their first victory on 1 April. However, the Hurricanes suffered so many damaged aircraft on the ground that No.229 was temporarily disbanded, on 29 April 1942.

The author's interview with Jeff West concluded at this point with the intention that we would continue at a later date. With Jeff's untimely death on April 1998 that sadly did not happen.

Following Jeff West's survival of the Malta campaign, his next major posting was with No.3 Maintenance Unit at Aboukir, where he was involved with the development of Mk IX Spitfires as high-altitude interceptors. A number of Mk IXs were lightened and refined for the role, with Squadron Leader Jeff West and his team acting as test pilots.

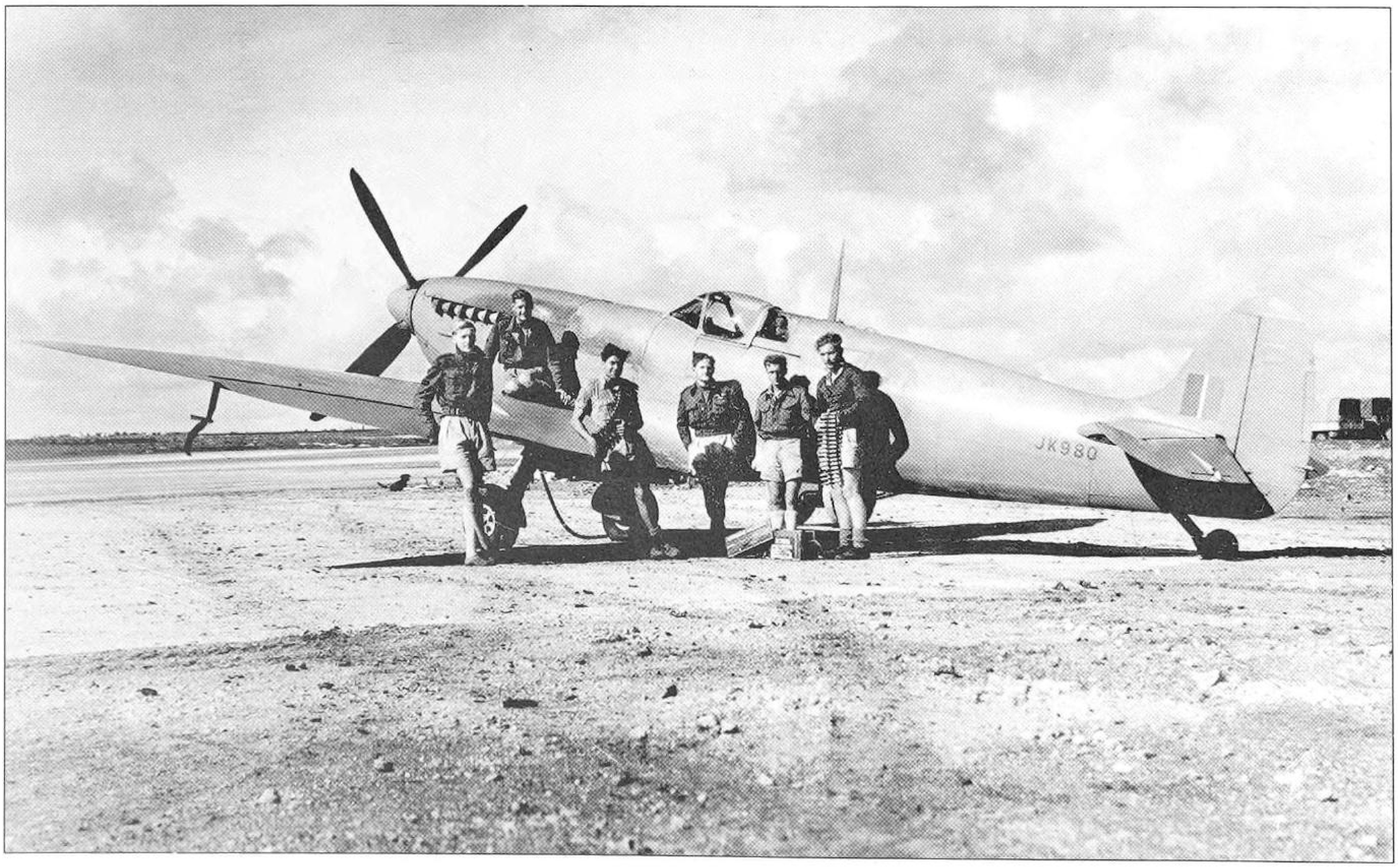
Squadron Leader Jeff West in the cockpit of a Spitfire Mk IX refined for the high-altitude interception role, Egypt 1944. (J West)

How Douglas Bader was lost

In the authors only interview with Jeff West before he passed away in 1998, he intimated that there was 'lots more to tell' about his war-time experiences, but unfortunately I never got to ask the important questions...

However, a documentary by Wildfire TV in 2006 concludes that Douglas Bader was almost certainly shot down in a friendly fire incident by another RAF pilot.

A lightened and finely-tuned Spitfire F.IXc refined by the RAF Maintenance Unit at Aboukir, Egypt, 1944. Squadron Leader Jeff West, centre, was a test and development pilot on the high-altitude interceptor development team. (J West)



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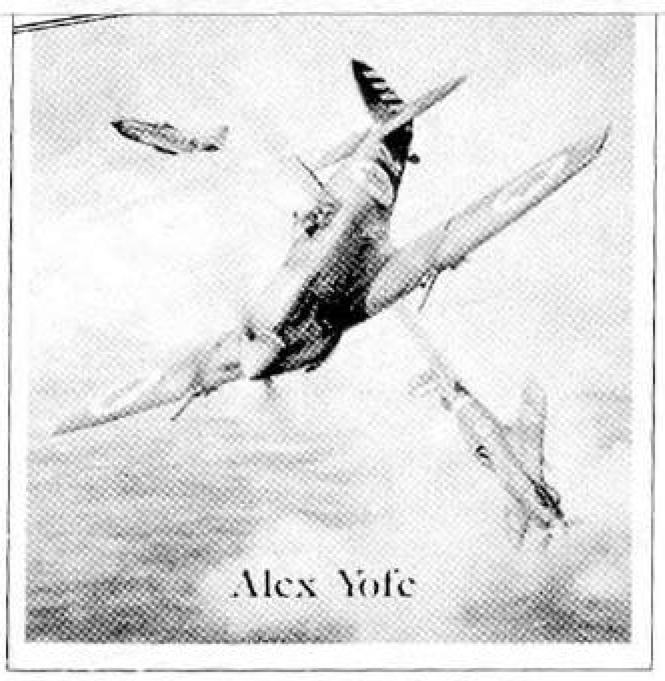

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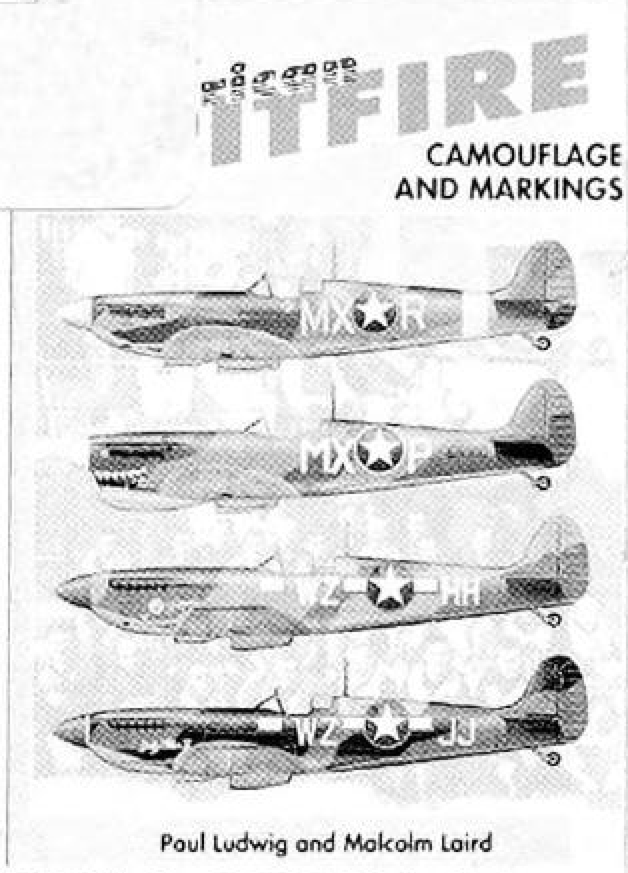

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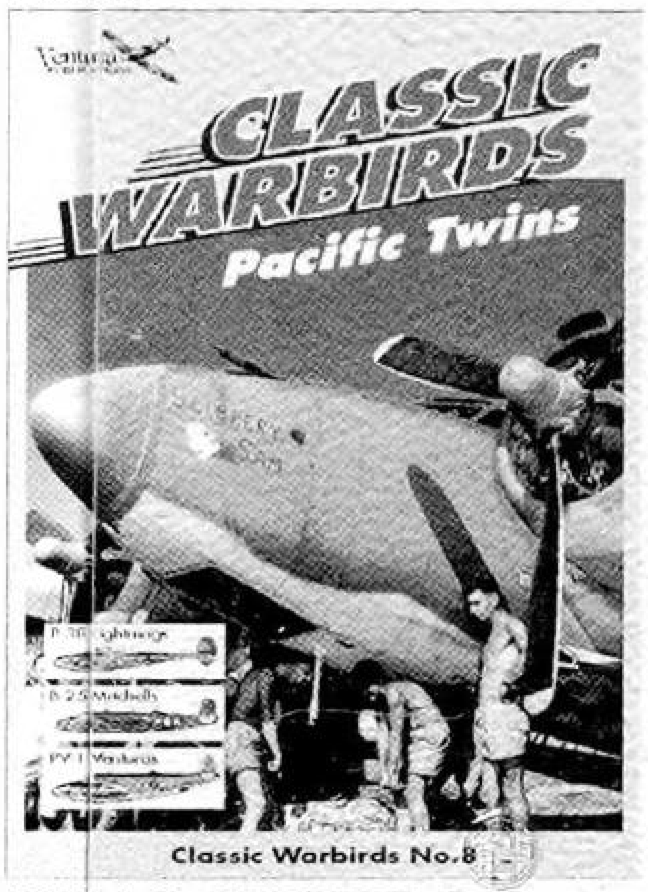

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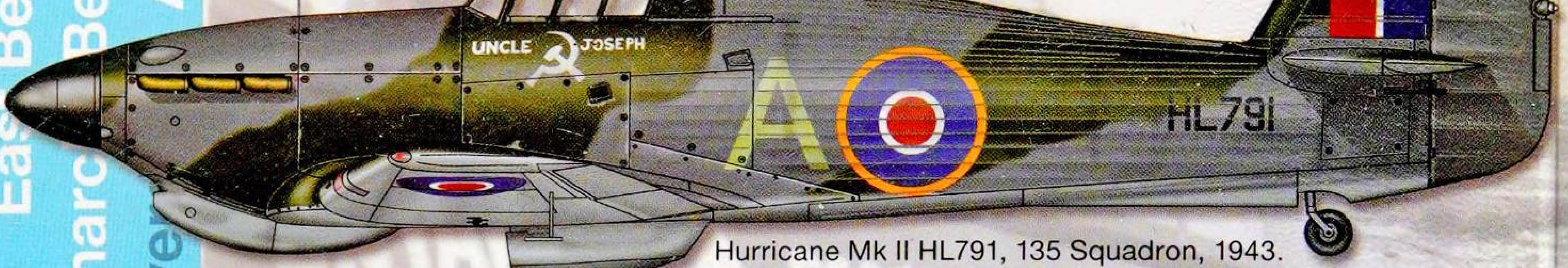
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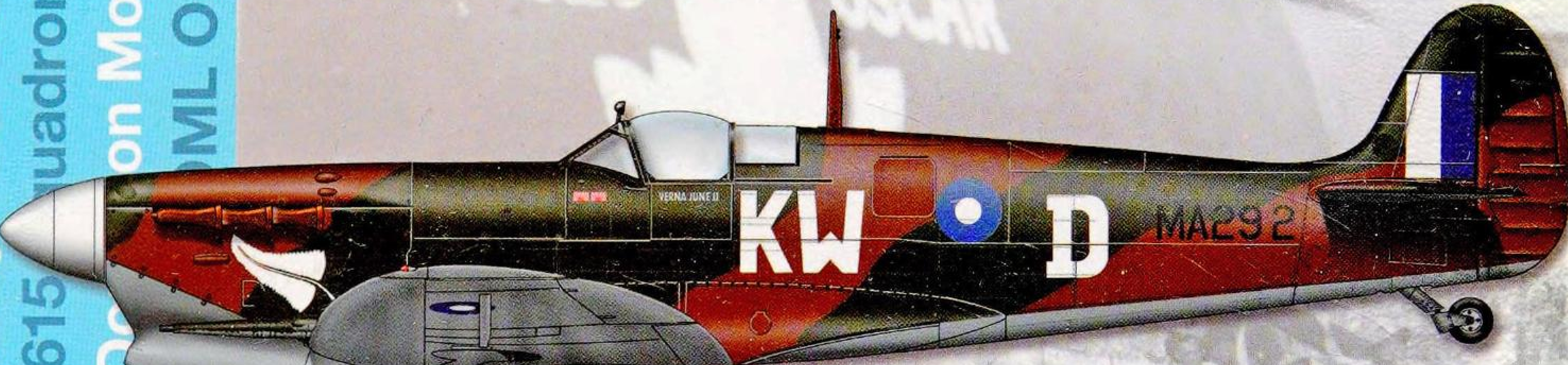
Hurricane Mk II HL791, 135 Squadron, 1943.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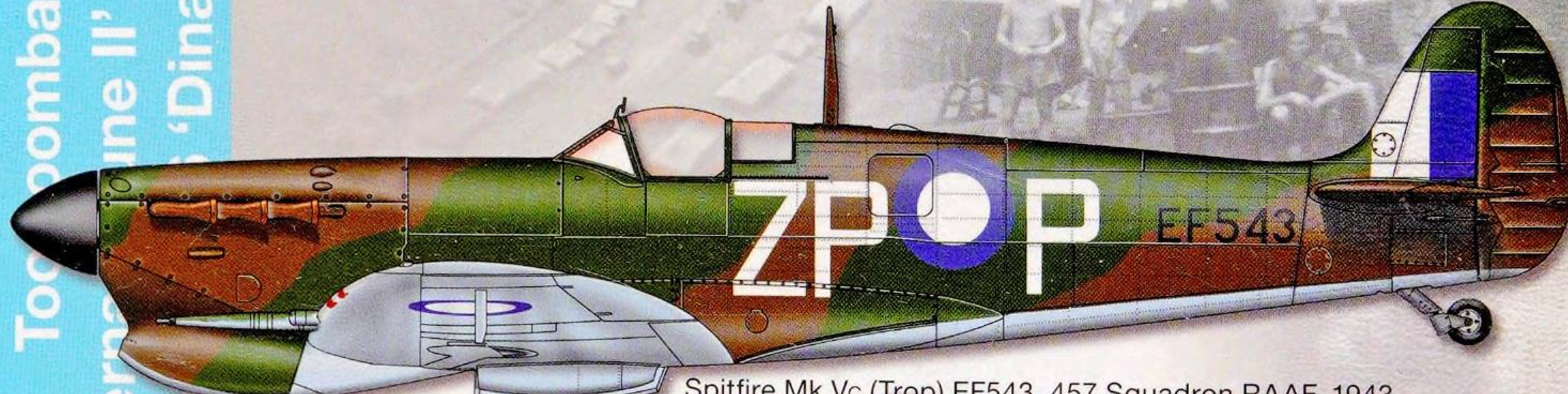
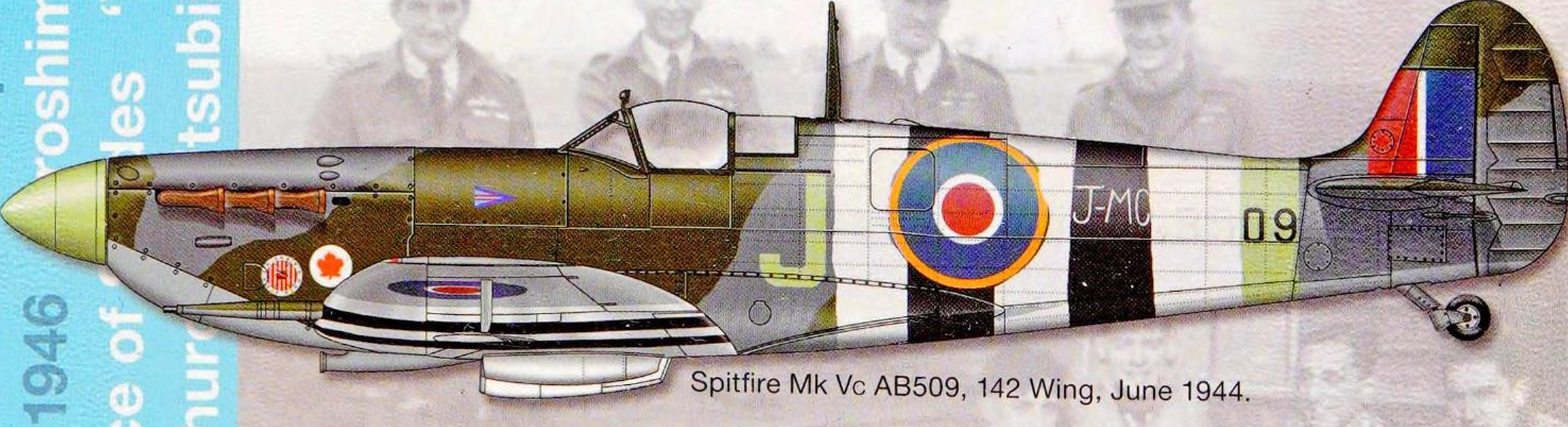
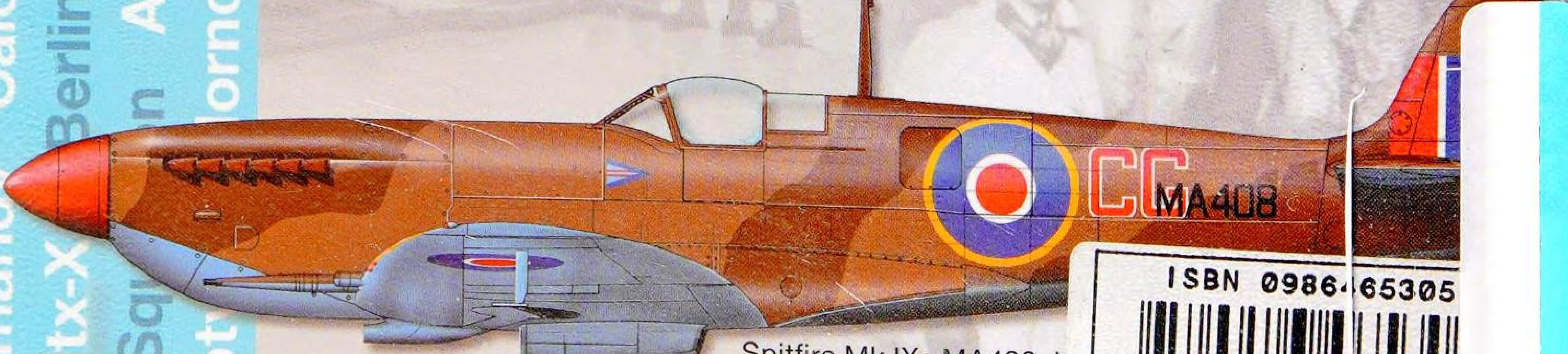
Spitfire Mk Vc (Trop), MA292, 615 Squadron, 1944.



Spitfire Mk Vc (Trop) EF543, 457 Squadron RAAF, 1943.



Spitfire Mk Vc AB509, 142 Wing, June 1944.



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